

IT'S A CRIME

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***to* GINNY LOVETON**

who was in at the kill

chapter one

I LIT a cigarette slowly, flipped the match out of the open office window, and looked at the girl sitting in the straight backed chair in front of my desk. She sat erect with both feet planted firmly together on the floor. Her hands fumbled nervously with the clasp of the worn-looking handbag in her lap, and beads of perspiration stood out on her upper lip. It was hot in my dingy little office, hot even for New York in August, but not hot enough for that. I perspire easily, and my own face was dry.

The girl's face wasn't beautiful. It wasn't even pretty, but it had had good care. The faintly overdone makeup tried hard to conceal the freckles but not hard enough to make me wonder if her red hair was real. Her small pug nose just missed giving her a bulldog look. She was bareheaded and she wore a good-looking green gabardine suit, but the skirt showed where the hem had been let down; it hadn't been made with the "New Look."

The girl cleared her throat, leaned forward and said, "I want you to understand, Mr. Drake, that I've never done anything quite like this before." I nodded without

saying anything. She waited for me to answer, still bending forward slightly, a half-frown on her face. The frown shot tiny crow's feet out from the corners of her eyes, and I saw for the first time that she wasn't exactly a *girl* after all. She might have been forty but no younger. Her figure didn't tell me anything. It wasn't fat and it wasn't slim, just a figure. She wasn't quite tall enough for her feet to rest flat on the floor, so she sat forward on the edge of the chair. Her voice had a brassy, trained quality, and there wasn't any accent in it. It sounded harsh and a little too loud the way an actress's does after fifteen or twenty years of projecting over the footlights.

She didn't look much like an actress, but you never can tell. A hell of a lot of people get stagestruck when they're young. I ought to know because I was one of them. Some have sense enough to get out while they still can; others stick it out to the bitter end. I was one of the former, and I've never been sorry. There may not be much fame or money in being a private investigator, but as they used to say in Pigalle, "It's a living."

The redhead was still waiting for me to say something. I inhaled on my cigarette and spoke through the smoke. "I understand, Mrs. Gault. Just relax and tell me why you wanted to hire me."

She chewed lightly on her bottom lip and glanced sideways out of the window. I followed her gaze with my eyes but the only thing I saw was the forlorn rusty fire escape on the theatre next door. The fire escape was empty, and the dirty brick wall was as bleak and dismal-looking as ever. The late afternoon sun threw futuristic, barred shadows against it from the balusters of the fire

escape. It resembled the shadows of a prison window. It was depressing, and it wasn't anything to look at. Mrs. Gault looked at it without seeing it. Suddenly she stopped chewing her lip and said in a low voice, "My husband is in love with another woman, but he won't give me a divorce. I want to hire you to get the necessary evidence. You know what I mean?" I nodded again but she didn't see me. Her face was still turned towards the window. When she didn't hear my voice, she wheeled back towards me and asked anxiously, "You do that sort of thing, don't you?"

"Sure," I said. "We call it keyhole peeping. It's not the nicest work in the world, but it's the bulk of our business." She seemed relieved, and her body slumped into a more comfortable position in the chair. The pale blue eyes fixed themselves firmly on me and narrowed shrewdly.

"How much do you charge for doing that?"

"That depends on the time and trouble. My usual fee is thirty dollars a day. If there's a fight and my clothes get torn up or if I get hurt, it'll cost you more."

"I don't think there'll be any trouble." Her voice sounded uncertain. "It shouldn't take you long either."

"Do you know who the woman is?" I asked.

"No," she answered, a little too quickly. I let it pass and drew a pad and pencil toward me on the desk.

"That'll make it tougher then. I'll have to tail your husband to the girl, and that might take time. Do you know where your husband's living?"

Mrs. Gault seemed surprised. "Oh, yes," she said. "He's still living with me; I mean he still lives in our apartment.

He hasn't moved out. I'm not even sure that he knows I know about the other woman."

"I thought you said he wouldn't give you a divorce."

A brief startled expression crossed her face but she said softly, "He's Catholic. I'm not; not really I mean."

"I see," I said.

She leaned forward in her chair again and looked anxiously at me. "*I can* get a divorce, can't I? I . . . I mean it doesn't make any difference about his being a Catholic, does it? It doesn't matter if I don't care, does it?"

"Not in the eyes of the law . . . not if you get the right evidence. The law doesn't give a damn what your religion is. If you've got the proper evidence, you can get a divorce in this state. I guess you know what that evidence is, don't you?"

"Of course," she said and dropped her eyes. I grinned and she looked back up at me. "That's why I want to hire you. I want you to find out who this woman is and catch them."

"Okay," I said. "I think I can manage it all right." I paused and mashed out my cigarette in the ash tray. Mrs. Gault crossed her legs and waited. The legs had looked better with the feet flat on the floor. I leaned back in the swivel chair and toyed with the pencil in my hand. "Now then, tell me all about it. For instance, how do you know there's another woman?"

Her voice was disdainful. "Do you think I'm a fool? I know when a man doesn't love me any more, and I know Cullen doesn't spend his nights with a bunch of men. He just isn't the type for that."

"Maybe you'd better tell me just what type he is."

"He's very handsome, tall and blond with wavy hair." She added as an afterthought with surprising frankness, "And he's younger than I am, nearly ten years younger. He's really very sweet when he wants to be, but I'm afraid he isn't too bright." She glanced quickly at me. "By that I don't mean that Cullen is stupid. He isn't. It's . . . it's just that he's young and hasn't been around very much." Her voice sank lower. "And he's got quite an ego. His good looks have made him conceited. Even the fact that he's a lousy actor and hasn't been able to land a job hasn't changed that."

"He's an actor?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, he only wants to be. I guess he got the idea from me."

"You're in the theatre?"

"Yes. At least I used to be. I'm in radio now."

My eyes ran quickly over the green outdated suit and the worn purse. I began feeling just a little sorry for Mrs. Gault in spite of the fact that I suspected she was holding out on me. Maybe it wasn't very much and not important. Maybe she just wasn't telling the whole truth because of false pride or something equally silly. Still something was off-key, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I leaned forward and doodled idly on the pad of paper. "You say your husband spends most of his nights away from home?"

"Yes. He usually leaves the apartment about eleven o'clock at night. He doesn't come back until one or two in the morning. Sometimes he doesn't come back at all."

"Don't you ask him where he goes?"

"Certainly."

"What does he tell you?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "At first he made lame excuses that any child could have seen through. Then when I accused him of lying, he got mad and told me it wasn't any of my business."

I wrote notes on the pad. I didn't really need them, but it makes a client feel better when you do that. When I had finished, I looked up and asked, "Does your husband work at any other job while he's trying to be an actor?"

"No."

"Has it occurred to you, Mrs. Gault," I said, "that maybe it isn't another woman that holds your husband's interest at night?"

Her face showed surprise. "Why, no. What do you mean?"

"How's he fixed for money?"

She smiled knowingly. "Oh, no, it isn't anything like that. The only money he has is what I give him and what he sometimes wins on the horses."

"Maybe he doesn't really play the horses," I said.

The expression on her face became anxious. "You don't think that Cullen . . ." She stopped and left the sentence hanging in midair.

"Maybe," I said.

She shook her head emphatically. "Oh, no, not Cullen." Just the trace of a sneer flickered around her mouth. "He'd never be mixed up in anything crooked. He hasn't got the nerve for that. No, Mr. Drake, I'm sure it's a woman. Besides, I know Cullen doesn't love me any more. A woman can sense things like that."

"I suppose so," I agreed.

She leaned towards me eagerly. "You can start on ~~his~~ right away?"

"Tonight." I tapped my pencil on the desk. "I'll need a retainer."

"How much?"

"Thirty dollars. Okay?"

"I guess so," she said and opened her pocketbook. In a second her hand came out with some bills. She took off two tens and two fives and shoved them across the desk to me. I folded the bills and put them in my pocket. She watched me the way a kid does when he has to give away a piece of candy. "It seems pretty expensive."

I got up from behind the desk. "Don't worry. You'll get your money's worth. I'll be on hand tonight to follow him when he leaves."

"Here's my address and telephone." She reached over and wrote on my pad. I picked it up and looked at it. The phone was a Murray Hill exchange, and the address she'd written was on East Forty-fourth Street, probably not far from the river. "There's a lobby," she said. "You can wait for him there. We live in the Claymore Apartments. It's almost like a hotel. I hope he doesn't get suspicious. I tried to follow him myself one night, but he saw me and told me to let him alone. That's why I decided to come to you."

"He won't spot me," I said. She stood up and moved toward the door. "Oh, by the way, I almost forgot. Have you a picture of your husband?"

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Gault took her hand away from the doorknob and once again opened her purse. I walked

over and stood beside her while she rummaged through the contents. It took her nearly thirty seconds to find the photograph. It was only a snapshot. She handed it to me uncertainly. "It was taken a couple of years ago when Cullen was still in uniform, but it's a good likeness."

I looked at the picture and saw a tall young man with a supercilious smile on his near-handsome face. He was wearing suntans and no insignia was visible on his shirt. It was the type officers wore. You could tell because of the shoulder straps on it. "What branch was he in?" I asked.

A puzzled frown creased her forehead. "I'm not too sure. I think it was Artillery. I know he was a private."

"He's wearing an officer's shirt in this picture."

She shook her head slowly. "He wasn't an officer," she said.

Mrs. Gault once again reached for the doorknob. "You haven't been married very long then, have you?" I asked.

"No, in fact, I met Cullen when he was in the Army. He was waiting to be shipped out when I met him. I was working at the Stage Door Canteen, and he came in one night. He was from Kansas and he was lonesome. We talked a lot and danced together; and later, even though we weren't supposed to do it, I went out with him and had a couple of drinks. He hated the Army, and I guess I felt sorry for him. He'd never been in New York before." She stopped talking and remembered that night. It made her eyes a little softer.

"Nearly everybody hated the Army," I said, "that is everybody who actually did any fighting."

"I know," she said, "I didn't see Cullen again for nearly two years; in fact, I'd forgotten all about him. He wrote me a couple of letters but I never answered them. And then one day about a year and a half ago he called up. He still remembered that first night and how nice I'd been to him. He said he had come to New York to go on the stage. Of course, I saw him." A broken little smile played around her mouth, and the crow's feet came back into view. "He was such a lousy actor. Naturally I tried to help him and"—she spread her hands in a shrug—"we decided to get married." She paused and dropped her voice. "I guess it was a mistake, my being so much older than Cullen, but . . . well, I've never been a man-killer exactly, and I guess I loved the guy."

She'd turned her head away from me and now she opened the door.

"You still do, don't you?"

She moved through the door without looking back, and her voice was almost a whisper. "Yes."

I stood there in the door and watched her walk down the hall to the stairs. Just as she started down, I called. "You'll hear from me sometime-tonight or tomorrow." She didn't look back and she didn't say anything, but she did nod her head. It was a tight, hurried little nod, the sort you see in hospitals and at funerals.

I closed the outer door and sat down on the leather-covered bench in my drab little waiting room. The snapshot of Cullen Gault was still in my hand. I glanced idly at it. Selfish, unsophisticated ego showed all over the handsome, weak face. They're a dime a dozen, those wavy-haired pretty boys and most of them go to New

York or Hollywood. I guess there are a lot of women like Mrs. Gault, too, but not quite like her. When she'd opened her bag to look for the snapshot, I'd gotten a swell view of the inside. It isn't every woman who carries a brand new box of .32-calibre cartridges as company for her compact.

chapter two

THE Claymore Apartments turned out to be one of those brassy, modernistic places that began crowding out the tenements of the middle East Side back in the early thirties. You know the type I mean. They specialized in large one-room apartments at eighty dollars a month for actors, models, and kept women. The apartments once had new, flashy, cheap furniture, in-a-door beds, a kitchenette, and full hotel service. The actors and models who lived there then were either moderately successful or were young and had money from home. The kept women all looked alike and pretended to be something else. By the time the war came along, the cheapness of the furniture began to show, the prices went up, and the service was only a gesture. A few of the least successful actors and models hung on, but the rest had moved on to other fields. Most of the kept women were still there. They always are. The back streets of New York are filled with bygone hotels and these women who remember when their homes were new and chic.

On the night I walked into the lobby of the Claymore, it was still keeping up a pretty good front, but the clerk

behind the desk already had that shifty, quick "turnover trade" look. The hands of the clock over the desk pointed to ten-thirty-five; and except for the desk clerk and a couple of elevator boys, the lobby was deserted. Soft muted strains of a Muzak tune floated through the open door of a small dimly lit bar that stood on the right of the entrance. The elevator boys were talking in low voices and paid no attention to me. The clerk glanced up, saw that I was heading for the house phones, decided I wasn't a customer, and went back to whatever he was doing behind the desk. I went in one of the booths, closed the door behind me, and pretended to make a call. Two minutes later I came out, lit a cigarette, glanced at my watch impatiently, and walked into the little bar. I needn't have bothered; the desk clerk had already forgotten me.

The cocktail lounge wasn't doing much business. A couple talked quietly at a dark corner table, and a lone man sat at the end of the bar, staring gloomily down at a half-filled drink. He looked as if he'd been sitting there a long time. I took a seat near the centre where I could get a good view of the elevators in the lobby and ordered a bourbon and soda. I was halfway through my second one when Cullen Gault came out of the elevator. Even in civilian clothes, forty feet away, I didn't have any trouble recognizing him from the old snapshot. The slight sneer and weak handsome face hadn't changed any. He walked quickly toward the door as if he were in a hurry. I looked at my wrist watch and saw that it was five minutes after eleven. Taking my time, I finished my drink, put a dollar and a half on the bar, and went out through the lobby to the street. Gault was halfway up

the block, heading for Second Avenue. He was still walking fast and not looking back. I swung along behind him.

At the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-fourth, he stopped and looked up and down the street. I slowed down and began thinking fast. Somehow I hadn't figured him for a taxi. I guess it was because his wife had said he was broke. Since the war, cabs have been a problem in New York, especially at that time of night on Second Avenue. It was ten to one he wouldn't get one quickly. I stopped to light a cigarette and hoped. It was no good. Just as I struck the match, a taxi pulled up in front of him. He reached quickly for the door, and I decided to take a chance. Putting two fingers in my mouth, I whistled loudly and started running up the street, waving my hand. Gault stopped with his hand on the door and turned toward me questioningly.

"Wait a second," I called and ran up beside him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. His voice was irritated, almost petulant, and the Kansas twang still showed through the affected English accent.

I put my hand on his arm. "Listen," I said, "I'm in a hell of a hurry. Do you mind if I take this cab? You can get another in a minute or two."

He shook away from my hand impatiently and opened the door of the cab. "I'm in a hurry, too. Sorry."

"Wait a minute. Which way are you going?"

He got in the cab and started to sit down. Without turning toward me, he said, "Crosstown. Times Square."

"Swell," I said, "that's where I'm going, too. You don't mind if I ride along with you, do you?"

Gault started to protest but I was already in the cab.

I sat down beside him. "I'll pay for the cab and drop you off. Where are you going?"

He hesitated a second, then shrugged and leaned toward the cab driver. "Avalon Theatre." The driver nodded, and we moved off up Second Avenue and turned west into Forty-fifth Street. I sat back and watched Gault out of the corner of my eye. He kept his face straight ahead and bent forward a little as if he was trying to help the taxi make better time. I was pretty sure he hadn't paid the slightest attention to what I looked like. In the first place, it had been fairly dark on the corner and was even darker in the cab; and in the second place he was preoccupied with being late.

Gault didn't look at me once or say a word all the way across town. At the corner of Forty-fifth and Broadway he had the driver stop the cab and got out. I let him push his way ten or fifteen feet into the surging uptown crowd, then paid off the driver and walked along behind him. The entrance of the Avalon Theatre is on Forty-seventh Street, but Gault turned left at Forty-sixth. At first I thought he'd made a mistake, but halfway down the block he turned off into a small alleyway and I realized he must be going to the stage door of the theatre. I crossed to the other side of the street and stood there in the shadows. The street was fairly dark and deserted.

Gault had barely disappeared through the stage door when a man and a woman came out of the café next to the alley. The woman was bareheaded and wore a summer print dress. She was tall and dark; and even from across the street, I could see that she was a knockout. The

man was slim and dapper-looking. He wore a white Panama straw hat and a tan gabardine suit. The hat was pulled over one eye, and the shoulders of his form-fitting suit were well padded. A lighted cigar was gripped in his teeth, and he didn't seem to be in a very good frame of mind. The girl peered quickly down the dark little alleyway. The man stood in front of the café watching her, puffing impatiently on his cigar. Satisfied that the alley was empty, the girl turned and came back. He took the cigar from his mouth and started to say something, but she put a finger to his lips and spoke in a low voice. With her other hand, she patted him several times on the arm. The man pulled away from her and said, "Damn it, Tucker . . ." The girl shook her head swiftly and kissed him lightly on the mouth, shushing him. Then she turned him gently and gave him a little shove in the direction of Broadway. He took several half-stumbling steps with his head turned towards her; almost decided to come back, thought better of it, threw the cigar to the street in disgust, and stalked off towards Broadway. The girl watched him for a second and then waved good-bye. Although I couldn't see her face plainly, I knew she was smiling. She stood there a minute apparently waiting for him to look back. When he didn't she shrugged her shoulders, walked down the alley, and disappeared through the stage door.

Thirty seconds later she came out clinging to Gault's arm. Before they reached the sidewalk, I'd crossed the street and was busily looking through the windows of the café. Neither of them paid any attention to me as they

passed and I heard Gault say, "I'm awfully sorry I was late. I was afraid you'd stood me up."

The girl laughed. "I only went next door to buy a package of cigarettes. Didn't the stage doorman tell you?"

Gault's voice floated back to me as they moved down the sidewalk in the direction of Eighth Avenue. "Yes, but I was still afraid. Tucker, you know how . . ." The rest of his words were lost. He wasn't talking in a loud voice, but he sounded tense and strained. When they were about a hundred feet away, I sauntered after them. At Eighth Avenue they turned south and kept walking downtown until they came to the Washington Hotel at Forty-third and Eighth. When I saw that they were going in, I put on speed and entered the hotel just in time to see them step into a half-filled elevator. The operator was still waiting for the starter to give him the "go ahead" signal.

I walked across the lobby, got in and stood with my back to Gault and the girl. The door of the elevator closed and we started up. By the time we got to the tenth floor, the three of us were the only passengers left. I moved back against the side of the car and looked her over the way any man would size up a good-looking woman in an elevator. She was worth looking over, and it was easy to see she was used to it. Her figure was something to dream about, and her eyes were the most beautiful and tantalizing I've ever seen, deep dark brown with long curling lashes. She seemed to keep them in a slight, smiling squint like a near-sighted person who needs glasses but refuses to wear them.

I glanced idly at Gault, and our eyes met without recognition. He didn't know me from Adam. Gault looked back at the girl the way a ten-year-old kid would look at General Eisenhower. He had it bad, and it made him look more like a jerk than ever. I began really feeling sorry for Mrs. Gault.

The elevator operator said over his shoulder, "Floors?"

Gault cleared his throat and answered in what he considered an authoritative voice, "Roof Garden."

The operator nodded and glanced at me questioningly. "Fifteen, please," I said. The elevator slid to a stop and I got out. Three minutes later I caught another one, to the roof. It was a typical hotel roof, complete with orchestra, potted palms and dancing couples, most of whom would be out-of-town tourists who couldn't afford the luxury of the better class top-notch hotels.

The place was crowded, and it took me quite a while to spot Gault and the girl. I finally located them at a table for two in one of the far corners. Gault had a drink in front of him and was talking in a low voice. The girl was smoking a cigarette and not paying much attention to what he was saying. Her sleepy gaze wandered slowly around the roof. Once Gault took her hand pleadingly as I watched and tried to draw her towards him. An impatient frown flashed across her face, and she pulled her hand away. Gault looked suddenly frightened and obviously began apologizing to her. The half-dreamy smile slowly came back into her eyes and she nodded her head, but she still didn't look at him.

I went back out into the hall where the elevators were

and asked a bellboy where the nearest phone was. He pointed to the men's room at the end of the hall. I went in, found a booth, and dialled the number Mrs. Gault had given me that afternoon. It was a private number, not the regular Claymore switchboard, and Mrs. Gault answered almost immediately. "It's Drake," I said.

"Yes?" I couldn't tell whether her voice was more eager or fearful.

"You were right," I told her. "It's a woman."

There was a short pause; and when she spoke again, I caught the faint trace of a choke in her voice. "I knew it. I knew I was right." There was another short pause. "Who is . . . I mean, did you find out the girl's name?"

"Not all of it. I think her first name is Tucker. She's damn good-looking, tall and dark, and I think she's in the show at the Avalon Theatre. At least he met her at the stage door. Mean anything to you?"

"No," she said slowly, "it doesn't mean anything to me." She stopped talking again, and I debated whether or not to mention the man in the gabardine suit. Before I could make up my mind, she asked me, "Where are they?"

"At the Washington Hotel."

"Do you know the room number?"

"They're not in a room, at least not yet. Right now they're sitting together at a table on the roof garden. I'll call you later if anything like that happens. I just wanted to check with you. I thought maybe you'd recognize the girl from my description."

"No," she said uncertainly. "I don't know her, at least not from what you've told me. Did they see you?"

I laughed. "Sure, several times, but they don't know I'm tailing them."

"Where are you calling from now, Mr. Drake?"

"From a booth in the men's room just outside the Washington Roof."

Her voice suddenly became tense and excited. "Wait for me. I'll be right over."

"Don't be a sap," I said. "It'll ruin everything if they see you."

"They won't see me. It'll be crowded on the roof, and Cullen won't be expecting me . . ."

"Listen," I broke in, "you hired me to get evidence for a divorce. If they spot *you*, they'll spot *me* and that'll finish that."

"I'll be there in about twenty minutes." She sounded as if she hadn't heard what I'd said. "I want to see that woman. I want to see her myself."

"Okay," I said. "Have it your way. After all, it's your party."

"Yes," she said softly, "it's my party."

chapter three

WHEN I came out of the phone booth, the slim man with the Panama hat and the form-fitting gabardine suit was standing at the door of the roof garden. The hat was in his hand, and his back was towards me. He was staring at the corner of the roof where Gault and the girl were sitting. There was an intermission and the orchestra had stopped playing. The dance floor was empty; so he was plainly visible from any part of the roof. Near the elevators there were a couple of plush-covered benches. I walked over and sat down on one of them. Gabardine Suit motioned sharply with his head as if he had just caught the girl's eye. Twenty seconds passed and nothing happened. Then he turned away from the doorway, and I saw her coming towards us across the dance floor. I slumped back on the bench and stared at the opposite wall, letting the top of my body weave slightly. Just as Gabardine Suit's gaze swept over me, my eyes drooped shut, then snapped open drunkenly. It satisfied him, and he walked several steps down the hall and waited for the girl.

She came out fast ~~and didn't~~ bother to look at me. I

could tell from the way she walked that she was plenty sore. She stopped in front of him and said in a low, harsh voice that I heard perfectly, "You idiot, what did you come up here for? He might have seen you."

The man's voice was lower, but I could still hear what he said. "He doesn't know me."

"He might have seen you motion to me."

"He didn't, did he?"

"I don't think so. He's getting tight. I told him I had to go powder my nose."

Out of the corner of my partly closed eye, I saw Gabardine Suit take hold of the girl's arm. "Come on," he said. "It's all off. It was a lousy idea anyway."

"It wasn't mine," the girl said sharply.

The man looked at me. I was just another sleepy drunk waiting for his girl friend; nevertheless, he lowered his voice and said something I couldn't hear.

"I tell you he's flat broke," said the girl. "I can wrap him around my finger."

"You like him."

The girl laughed. "He's just a kid."

"Okay," said the man, "it's all off. Let's go."

The girl turned away and started back for the roof garden. "Good night, Luke."

The man's voice followed her, still low but tight and grim with anger. "Remember what I told you tonight. It still goes."

The girl laughed again, this time contemptuously. "Not yet you won't." As she walked onto the dance floor, Luke said too softly for her to hear him, "Don't be too sure, sweetheart." Then he turned, headed for

the elevator, and pressed the button. I yawned noisily and sat up straight on the bench, weaving a little as I did so. Luke looked in my direction, and I focused my eyes slowly on him. Suddenly I got to my feet and moved uncertainly over to him. I put a big friendly grin on my face. "I'll be damned," I said. "I'll be damned if it isn't old Moreland." I held out my hand. He didn't move, but his dark little eyes watched me suspiciously.

"You've made a mistake," he said curtly.

I looked foolishly at my outstretched hand, then frowned very thoughtfully. "No. No mistake." I snapped my fingers twice and rubbed my chin with the other hand. "Don't you remember me?" I asked.

"No." He started to turn away.

"Wait a minute." I reached out and grabbed his coat just under the left lapel. He jerked quickly away but not before I'd felt the outline of a filled shoulder holster. I nearly fell down with the sudden movement. The headwaiter and a couple of people leaving the roof were watching me from the doorway.

"Beat it, bud," said Luke in a low voice.

"Look," I said, "I may forget names, but I never forget faces or places. You may not remember me, but I remember you. Maybe your name isn't Moreland but . . ." I stopped and snapped my fingers again. "Hoagland, Hoagland, that's it."

An irritated frown crossed his face. "My name's Estep," he said, "and I never saw you before."

"What the hell's in a name. Estep, Moreland, Hoagland! Maybe you don't remember me, but you'll never

forget Christmas Eve in Malmedy, will you? Now I guess you remember me, don't you?"

The headwaiter started walking towards me. Luke said, "I never even heard of the place, and I *don't* know you. Now beat it, lush."

I swayed away from him. "Okay, okay, if that's the way you feel about it." The headwaiter took my arm gently but firmly.

"I'm afraid you're making a scene, sir. Don't you think you'd better go home?" Behind me the bar door opened and closed. I straightened up and looked around. Luke Estep was gone. I grinned at the waiter.

"I'm not drunk."

He stepped back and looked disbelievingly at me, but the sudden change in my actions impressed him.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he said slowly. "It seemed when you were talking to the gentleman that . . ."

I winked knowingly at him. "Practical joke. You understand?" He didn't, but he nodded anyway. He was getting embarrassed. I took hold of his arm and said in a low firm voice, "I'm expecting a lady friend in a few minutes. We'd like a table for two back over behind those palm trees." I motioned toward the roof with my free hand. "Okay?"

He still didn't quite know how to take me. "I'm not sure, sir."

I took a five-dollar bill from my pocket and pressed it in his hand. "Will this help?"

A smile crossed his face. "Yes, sir, it certainly will."

Fifteen minutes later I was sitting on the bench smok-

ing a cigarette when Mrs. Gault got off the elevator. She was still wearing the green suit and carrying the same handbag. We waited until the floor was filled with dancing couples, then followed the headwaiter around to the table I'd selected. It was partially hidden behind a potted palm in a dark corner well away from the dimly lit dance floor. Even if Gault had been looking for us, I doubt if he'd have seen us. We sat down, and I ordered two drinks. As soon as the waiter had gone, Mrs. Gault said in a strong voice, "Where are they?"

I motioned toward the corner of the roof garden. "You can't see them from where you're sitting. When the floor clears, you can look the girl over if you lean to the left around the palm." She nodded and kept her eyes riveted on the dancing crowd. I watched her face closely. The freckles seemed to stand out more clearly than I remembered. At first I thought it was lack of makeup, then I realized she was simply very pale. When the waiter came with our drinks, she motioned the soda bottle away and drank the Scotch straight in one gulp. I lit a cigarette for her and she said uneasily, still without looking at me, "You're sure they haven't gone?"

"Positive," I answered. The music stopped, and couples began wandering back to their tables. I looked over toward Gault's table. He still had a drink in front of him, and he was still talking earnestly with his head bent forward towards the girl. Suddenly she laughed gaily, and he shook his head vigorously in a "no, no" movement. She kept laughing, and then turned her eyes towards the orchestra. The leader of the band was a tall, good-looking guy with a nice smile. He'd evidently spotted the girl

earlier and was giving her both barrels with his eyes. She leaned out from the table and said something to him. He bent down with his ear towards her, and she spoke again. The nice smile broke over his face and he nodded. Gault tugged pathetically at the girl's arm, but she didn't pay any attention. He was getting pretty drunk.

Beside me, I heard Mrs. Gault's breath come in sharply and heard her hiss the single word, "Bitch!" I turned quickly and saw that she'd spotted them. I saw something else, too. Her handbag was in her lap. She'd opened it, and her right hand was coming slowly out of the bag holding the handle of a snub-nosed .32. She was leaning to the left around the potted palm, and her eyes were glued on the girl across the room. My left hand shot out, grabbed her wrist, and twisted hard. The gun fell to the floor with a thud, the orchestra started playing, and Mrs. Gault began crying. She sat very straight and her body trembled all over, but she didn't make a sound. I reached quickly down, picked up the gun, slid it into the side pocket of my coat, and looked around. Nobody had seen what had happened; it was pretty dark on that side of the roof, and the nearest table was about eight or ten feet away.

I took a five-dollar bill from my wallet, placed it half under a plate, and took Mrs. Gault by the arm. "Wipe your eyes," I said. "We're going for a walk." Mechanically she put her hand back in the still open handbag and pulled out a handkerchief. I stood up and waited while she wiped her eyes, then helped her to her feet and steered her quickly around the dance floor out into the hall where the elevators were. She didn't say a word, and

she had stopped crying by the time we reached the lobby. Her face was set, rigid, and trancelike. Still holding her by the arm, I led her out into Forty-third Street, and we started walking east towards Broadway.

Three or four doors away a brassy neon sign said "Henry's Bar and Grill." I took Mrs. Gault inside, found a high-backed booth near the rear of the place, and sat down opposite her. She didn't protest and she still didn't speak. A gum-chewing waitress came over to the booth, and I told her to bring us two Scotch and sodas. She nodded and ambled over to the bar. I took my time lighting a cigarette, then blew smoke across the table at Mrs. Gault. "That was a stupid thing to do," I said slowly.

Mrs. Gault's eyes met mine across the table. They were filled with frustrated angry defiance. "I hate her, I wanted to kill her." I noticed for the first time that my own hand was trembling a little. I placed it flat on the table and took a deep breath. The business up on the roof had scared me more than I had realized.

"People go to the electric chair for murder in this state."

"I don't care. I don't care about anything any more. She's rotten clear through. I want to kill her."

I leaned back in the booth and watched Mrs. Gault. She sat very straight and looked me in the eye. She was perfectly sane and sober. A shiver ran the length of my spine, and I felt goose bumps come and go quickly on my arms. She meant what she was saying.

"Who is she?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

Mrs. Gault reached out, took a cigarette from the pack

I'd placed on the table, and lit it. "I thought once she was my best friend. Her name is Tucker Calhoun."

"Why did you hire me if you knew who the girl was?" I asked.

She looked at me in surprise. "Don't you see? I wasn't sure. I suspected it was Tucker, but I wanted to be sure before . . ." She stopped abruptly.

"I see." The waitress came with our drinks, and I paid her. When she'd gone back to the bar again, I said, "You're a sap. This Tucker Calhoun doesn't give a damn about your husband."

Her pale, hard eyes narrowed. "I know that. That's why I hate her so much. If she really loved Cullen, it wouldn't be so bad. If I thought she would make him happy . . ." She paused, and I saw the knuckles of her hand go white as she clenched the fingers into a tight fist on the table. Then she leaned forward toward me. "She's never cared for any man, not really." A sudden little laugh came from her mouth. "Don't get me wrong. Tucker likes men, and she's had plenty of them. There's only one thing she likes better, and that's money." The laugh faded away, and her voice became bitter. "She doesn't really want Cullen. He can't help her or give her money. She's only taking him because *I've* got him." Mrs. Gault shook her head. "Oh, I know Cullen is handsome and young, but Tucker isn't interested in that particularly. She just wants to take Cullen away from me. Tucker would think that was very funny."

I remembered the conversation I'd heard between Luke Estep and Tucker Calhoun. "I'm not so sure about that," I said.

"But you just told me yourself that you didn't think Tucker gave a damn for him."

"I don't think she does, not the way you think. She may be interested in him for another reason."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Gault's voice became interested.

"Does the name Luke Estep mean anything to you?"

A thoughtful frown creased her forehead. "It sounds familiar," she said after a few seconds, "but I can't place it. Who is he?"

"I don't know yet, but he was talking to Tucker just before your husband met her this evening, and he carries a gun. He looks like a Broadway character and from something I heard them say, I gathered that this Calhoun girl is on the make for your husband for some other reason than love or making you miserable."

A puzzled expression came over Mrs. Gault's tired face. "What do you mean?"

"I got the idea Estep and the Calhoun girl wanted to use your husband in some way, but Estep had a change of heart. At any rate, he followed them to the roof and tried to make the girl walk out on your husband."

Mrs. Gault shook her head, and the bitterness came back into her voice. "But Tucker wouldn't leave Cullen?"

"No," I admitted, "she told Estep to run along and peddle his papers elsewhere. He was pretty sore about it, too."

The hope that had come into her eyes slowly faded. "You see you're all wrong. This man, the one you saw, must have just been one of her men. Tucker likes to have

as many as possible on the string. He was simply jealous of Cullen's being with her. Don't you see?"

I didn't, but I let it pass. "Okay, have it your way; but if you're smart, you'll take my advice and forget the girl. If you really want evidence for a divorce, I'll stick with it until I get it."

Once again she shook her head. "I couldn't forget her even if I wanted to. I tell you I hate her. I don't care about a divorce or anything else. I made up my mind to kill her yesterday if it turned out that *she* was the girl Cullen was running after. Tonight when you called I lied to you about not knowing who she was. I'd decided to kill her and then turn the gun on myself."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," I said. "No man is worth all that."

She didn't flare up or get angry, but tears came into her eyes again. "I love him," she said simply. "I love him and I've lost him forever because of her." Her voice sank to a whisper. "I hate her, I hate her."

I waited until she wiped the tears from her eyes for the second time. "You said she used to be your best friend."

"I said I *thought* she was my best friend once. That was a few years ago, even before I met Cullen."

"You've known her a long time then?"

"Yes, ever since I came to New York, sixteen years ago. I first met her at the old Studio Club over on Fifty-third Street. It was a boarding house where young actresses lived. She was just a kid, and we shared a room." Mrs. Gault stopped talking for a minute as she remembered. A faraway look came into her eyes which slowly

changed to bitter sarcasm. "I suppose I should have known about her even then, but I was always a trusting soul who thought all her friends were wonderful people."

"You mean you've had trouble with her before?"

She laughed sarcastically. "Of course, lots of times: at first it was only in little ways, like borrowing my clothes and money and then forgetting it; then there were some jobs, jobs I should have gotten; jobs I deserved and could have done better than Tucker. She can't act, and I can. I'm a good actress, *really* good, although maybe you wouldn't think it to look at me. But I didn't get the jobs and Tucker did. She was even more beautiful then than she is now; and even if she couldn't act, she had plenty of talent in a more important direction." She paused and looked meaningly at me. "You know, of course, that most producers and directors are men."

"You don't have to draw a diagram," I said.

She went on talking in the same low voice. "There was a boy once before, too. It wasn't really serious with me. I was fond of him and it might have worked out, but he fell in love with Tucker and she enjoyed it a lot for a while, then threw him over. He took it pretty hard and left New York. I don't know what ever happened to him." She stopped talking again, and a sad, cynical, little smile played around her mouth. "It's funny," she said finally. "It didn't break my heart, and I thought it was all very logical at the time. I didn't even get sore at Tucker. I believed her when she told me how sorry she was, and how she'd done everything she could to discourage him."

"When did you begin getting wise to her?" I asked.

"About two or three years ago. It wasn't anything special that happened. I guess I just began getting smarter. Any fool could have seen what a tramp she was getting to be, one man after another, taking money and clothes from them . . . you know."

"I know."

"She kept on using me and taking advantage of me until I finally stopped seeing her very often. I think she went on tour with a couple of shows about that time. Anyway I didn't see her or hear from her until about a month ago. She called up and said she had a job in *Night-wind*. That's the play that just opened at the Avalon."

"Does she have a big part?"

"No. She isn't really even *in* the play. She's the general understudy. Naturally I asked her over to our apartment. That was when she first met Cullen. I had the feeling then that she was flirting with him; but, of course, I wasn't sure, and then he started going out nights. As I told you, I tried to follow him but he saw me. That's why I came to you. I had to make sure."

"You didn't really want a divorce at all then?"

"No."

I finished my drink and put out my cigarette. "Well, in that case you won't need me any more."

"No," she said dully, "I won't need you any more."

"I'm afraid you owe me ~~ten~~ dollars."

Her eyes came up questioningly. "Ten dollars more? Why?"

"Expenses. I had to tip the headwaiter five dollars, and *our* bill was another five."

She hesitated a second, then shrugged hopelessly. "I

suppose you're right." Her freckled hands tugged at her handbag, opened it, reached inside, and came out with some bills. She slowly counted off ten ones and handed them to me. There were only a couple left in her hand. She put them back in the bag and closed it. I folded the ten ones, put them in my wallet and felt like a heel. Mrs. Gault held out her hand across the table. "Give me back my gun," she said tonelessly.

I got up out of the booth and shook my head. "Go home and get some sleep and think over what I told you. You're upset tonight, and you might do something foolish. Tomorrow you'll feel different. Come by my office in a day or two, and you can have it."

"I won't feel different," she said.

I stood there beside the booth looking down at her. "I don't suppose you have a permit for the gun, do you?"

"No, I don't have a permit."

"I shouldn't give the gun back to you at all, in that case."

She looked up at me, her face tired and drawn, and her eyes dead. "It wouldn't make any difference. Nothing would make any difference." Her voice fell almost to a whisper. "And there are always other guns."

"Stop talking like a fool."

Her eyes left my face and stared into nothingness. Her body straightened stiffly, and the knuckles of the freckled hands grew white as she once again clenched her fists. "I hate her," she said. "I hate her more than anything in the world!"

chapter four

IT was ten minutes to one when I left Mrs. Gault sitting in the booth of Henry's Bar and Grill. I stood outside on the sidewalk for a minute watching her through the plate-glass window. Her back was towards me, and I couldn't see her face. She still sat very straight. The waitress went over to her and said something. Mrs. Gault nodded her head, and the waitress went back to the bar. The bartender started pouring a drink. I turned away from the window, walked back to the Washington Hotel, and took the elevator up to the roof garden.

The crowd had thinned out some, but the orchestra was going full blast. I stopped in the entrance and looked over towards Gault's table. He was sitting alone with a drink in front of him. One lock of his hair had fallen over his eye, and he looked drunk. I waited in the hall for a couple of minutes, thinking maybe the girl had gone to the ladies' room; but she didn't appear. Gault didn't hear me come up to his table. When I pulled out a chair and sat down next to him, he turned slowly and stared at me with a blank expression.

I said in a friendly voice, "Hello, Cullen, what happened to your girl friend?"

His bleary eyes looked at me without recognition. "Who're you?" His voice was thick and fuzzy.

"A friend with some good advice."

The bleary eyes watched me a second in silence, and I could hear his heavy slow breathing. He was drunker than I'd first thought. Finally he said, "I don't need any advice. I've had all the advice I want."

"You'd better take this advice," I told him, "or your wife may get in some serious trouble."

A foolish laugh came from his mouth. "So my wife sent you! To hell with her. To hell with my wife."

"You're drunk," I said. "Why don't you go on home?"

He half turned toward me and stared for a second with heavy-lidded eyes. Then he said thickly, "To hell with you, too."

"You're a fool, Gault. You've got a nice wife, and she loves you. The Calhoun girl is playing you for a sucker. She doesn't give a damn about you."

He shook his head doggedly. "She loves me. I know she loves me."

"She walked out on you tonight, didn't she?"

"She loves me."

I laughed sarcastically, and Gault slowly swung his eyes back on me. "What's funny about that?"

"You're a sap," I said. "There was another guy with her just before you met her tonight. He even came up here a little while ago and talked to her."

Gault half rose from his seat. He swayed dangerously and put both hands on the table. "You're lying."

"Sit down," I said and pushed him back in his chair. He sat there staring at me, a slightly startled expression on his face. "Listen," I went on, "you're drunk, but maybe you can understand this. Maybe it'll sober you up a little. The Calhoun girl and a shady-looking character named Luke Estep were playing you for some sort of sucker. For some reason or other, Estep called it off tonight." I stopped to let that sink in. Gault started to shake his head slowly, then stopped. Drunk as he was, something was starting to make sense with him. "That's why she ran out on you a little while ago."

Gault leaned forward on his elbows, glowered darkly across the dance floor, and muttered something I couldn't understand. Then he shook his head, the way a fighter does when he has been hit hard and is trying to clear his brain. I reached over and took hold of his arm. "You're lucky to get out of it so easy. If you're smart, you'll go on home and forget the whole business. Your wife knows about the Calhoun girl. Tonight she brought a gun up here and tried to kill her, but I stopped her. I won't be there to stop her the next time."

He turned bleary incredulous eyes on me, and for a second I didn't think he'd gotten what I'd said. Then he sank slowly back in his chair and said in a low voice, "Don't worry, my wife won't kill Tucker. She won't ever get the chance."

"What do you mean?"

His breathing became faster, and his face suddenly seemed to lose the whisky flush. The habitual sneer almost disappeared as anger flooded over his features. "I mean I love Tucker. I don't give a damn for my wife. If

you're telling the truth and Tucker's been lying to me, I'll kill her myself. If I can't have her, so help me God, nobody else is going to have her either."

I didn't say anything, just sat there watching him. He was drunk, but you never can tell. He knew well enough what I'd said. His eyes kept challenging me for a second, then he motioned for his waiter, paid the check and staggered off across the dance floor toward the elevators. I didn't try to stop him or follow him. After all, it really wasn't any business of mine any more; I'd done my job and been paid for it.

When I left five minutes later, Gault had disappeared. On the way over to Broadway I stopped and looked through the window of Henry's Bar and Grill. Mrs. Gault had gone, too. I decided to forget the whole thing, took the Seventh Avenue subway to my Eleventh Street apartment, and went to bed.

Even though I was tired, I didn't go to sleep right away. I kept thinking about Mrs. Gault's loaded .32 and Cullen Gault's final words. I also gave a little thought to the well-filled shoulder holster under Luke Estep's form-fitting gabardine coat and his low voiced, "Don't be too sure, sweetheart." I suppose all that thinking should have made me a little sorry for the tall, dark-haired girl in the flowered dress; but, hell, nobody could ever feel sorry for a woman as beautiful as Tucker Calhoun.

chapter five

THE chauffeur came into my office the next morning at ten-thirty-five. He made about as much noise as a tropical sunrise and was twice as impressive in his expertly fitted, maroon-coloured uniform and smartly shined puttees. Although the door both to my reception room and to the outer hall had been closed, I didn't hear a sound until he cleared his throat and I looked up and saw him standing there. He was young and tall with a figure to match the uniform, and he didn't take off his jauntily tilted cap.

When he saw that I'd noticed him, he moved easily in the direction of my desk, taking his time and looking me over appraisingly. His eyes were bold, almost sneering; and even without the sprawling, smashed nose, I would have known he was an ex-boxer. It showed in the thick muscular neck, sloping shoulders and light, graceful walk. In one hand he held a white envelope, which he rapped softly with the fingers of his other hand. When he reached the desk, he stopped and looked down at me without speaking. A faintly contemptuous smile played around his mouth. It annoyed me. I leaned back in my

swivel chair and eyed him coldly. "*My chauffeur* knocks before he comes in," I said.

His eyebrows went up in surprise and he laughed. It was a real honest-to-God laugh, not forced or embarrassed. He thought it was funny. It annoyed me more than ever. The chauffeur tossed the envelope on the desk in front of me and said in an amused voice that had been moulded in Brooklyn, "I just wouldn't have believed it, smart cracks and all." A wolfish grin spread over his pug face.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"My boss wants to hire you." He pointed a finger at the envelope. He tells you about it in there."

"Who is your boss?"

The chauffeur pointed again at the envelope, then turned away, and walked slowly over to the window. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and stood there with his back to me. I picked up the envelope and looked at it. It was addressed in large sweeping handwriting to "Steven Drake" at my office address. There wasn't any return address. I slit open the envelope with my thumb, drew out the single sheet of paper, and read, "Dear Sir: If this procedure seems somewhat unusual to you, please ascribe it to the fact that my profession places me much in the public eye and demands discretion. I find myself at the moment in a rather serious situation and have decided that I need the services of a private detective who is capable and trustworthy. After careful investigation, I have picked you to help me. I need hardly say that money is no object. Come at once with Jova

(my chauffeur and trusted servant) and follow his instructions unquestioningly. Thank you."

There was no signature. I put the note back in the envelope and looked at the chauffeur. He still stood at the window with his back to me. "Okay," I said. "What's it all about?"

He turned slowly and raised the thick eyebrows again. "You read the note, didn't you?"

"Sure. It sounds like the opening bars of a dime novel—and it's just about as enlightening."

The chauffeur grinned his wolf grin again. "The boss has a swell imagination. It helped put him where he is today."

"Maybe you'd better tell me just where that is. He forgot to sign his name."

If it surprised him, he didn't show it. "If the boss didn't sign his name, he did it on purpose." The chauffeur glanced at his wrist watch. "We're wasting time. He said to have you there by eleven. It's twenty of now. Get your hat and let's go."

It was my turn to laugh. "This boss of yours takes a hell of a lot for granted," I said. "I'm a busy man and my time is valuable." I indicated the envelope on my desk. "He talks big about money, but there's none in here. If he wants to hire me, tell him to come to my office."

The chauffeur laughed again, then reached in his pocket, and pulled out a wallet. He opened it, drew two crisp notes from inside, and put them on my desk. I picked them up and looked them over. They were brand new one-hundred-dollar bills, and they looked okay. The chauffeur moved off towards the door. "Get your

hat, glamour boy, and let's go." I got the hat, locked up the office, and followed him down the ancient flight of stairs and out into West Forty-fourth Street. Half a block away, he stopped beside a long, low-slung black limousine and opened the door. "Get in," he said. "The help rides in front." If he thought that would get a rise out of me, he was wrong. I got in without a word and sat down. I was still thinking about those two one-hundred-dollar bills in my pocket.

chapter six

FROM the looks of the car and the chauffeur's rig, I expected him to take me across town to Park Avenue or the swanky upper East Side. However, I guessed wrong. At Seventh Avenue he turned downtown, and we rode in silence to Tenth Street where he swung east and crossed Sixth Avenue. We finally stopped in front of one of those freshly painted ivy-covered, narrow, brick houses that dot West Tenth Street between Fifth Avenue and Sixth. It's one of the nicest blocks in New York. Most of the old buildings are converted brownstones, but a few of them are private houses. The house in front of which we stopped was obviously one of the latter.

Jova got out and motioned me to follow him. Instead of going up the stoop to the front door, he led me down several steps to a basement door directly under the stoop, and we entered what was apparently the kitchen of the house. A large coloured cook in a freshly starched uniform was doing something to a lump of dough on a flour-sprinkled sideboard. She didn't bother to look at us as we crossed the room, passed through the pantry, and entered a long narrow halliway. At the end of the hall,

Jova stopped beside a little crooked staircase and opened a door on the opposite side of the hall. He held the door open and pointed inside. "Wait in here."

I walked in and found myself in a small, richly furnished man's study. The floor was covered completely with a soft Oriental rug. Rows of framed photographs lined one wall above a wide desk with an open typewriter on it. Against another wall, a comfortable, red leather sofa rested and looked at its brother easy chair sitting lazily near an unused fireplace. Two open French doors led into a sunlit, fence-enclosed garden at the back of the house. There were a couple of stone benches in the garden and a lot of flowers and bushes scattered around. In the centre a small fountain gurgled peacefully into a well-filled lily pond. It was a pleasant scene, and it showed a woman's touch. Jova stood in the doorway, watching me with a smug smile on his battered face. He gave me plenty of time to take it all in. Then he said, "Nice, huh?"

I took off my hat and tossed it on the red leather sofa. "Okay," I said, "I'm impressed. What happens now?"

Jova waved his hand towards the easy chair. "Make yourself at home. The boss won't be long." Then he moved into the hallway and closed the door of the study behind him. I walked over and looked at the photographs on the wall. There were forty or fifty of them, all professional glossy prints nicely framed under glass. Most of them were autographed pictures of celebrities. All of them were inscribed "To John and Peg." The rest of the pictures were play scenes featuring the famous theatrical couple, John Remington and his wife, Margaret Tulane.

My eyes left the pictures on the wall and travelled down to the wide desk. Just to the left of the typewriter there was another photograph of Tulane, this time in a full-face head shot. It had been done by a master who had completely caught the dark sensuousness of the actress's black hair and large beautiful mouth. Across the bottom of the picture in neat, precise handwriting were the words, "My Darling, I love you so. Peg."

There wasn't much doubt about whose house I was in. I began understanding why Jova had kept his hat on in my office. They didn't come any bigger than Remington and Tulane. For twenty-five years they'd ruled the theatrical world. They'd made millions. They'd even kicked Hollywood in the teeth by refusing to make pictures and gotten away with it. They were that big. Tulane had the glamour, and Remington the brain. Both had talent. She was called "the first lady of the theatre," and he was the best triple-threat man in the business. He was as well known for his playwriting and directing ability as he was for his acting. I looked down at Tulane's picture again. She didn't look a day over thirty-five, but I knew she must be near sixty. Remington was supposed to be even older than Tulane, but both were still going strong. They'd been happily married for more than twenty-five years, and their private life was supposed to be as successful as their careers.

I looked away from the picture and noticed a play manuscript lying on the other side of the typewriter. I picked it up and read the words, "*Nightwind* by John Remington," printed on the cover. *Nightwind* was the play running at the Avalon Theatre where I'd tailed

Cullen Gault the night before. Thirty seconds later I was still standing there with the manuscript in my hand, wondering just how full of coincidence the world really is when a deep, well-modulated voice behind me said, "It really isn't a very good play, Mr. Drake."

I turned quickly and saw the tall spare figure of John Remington standing in the open door. It was a day when doors opened without my hearing them. I tossed the manuscript back on the desk and said, "I wouldn't know. I haven't seen it."

Remington laughed — nervously, I thought — and closed the door quietly. He looked thinner and greyer and much older than he did on the stage and his face was drawn and haggard. As he crossed the room the hand he held out to me trembled slightly, but his grip was firm and steady.

"Don't waste your money on it," said Remington. He paused and the famous left eyebrow lifted slightly. "I suppose I shouldn't say that about one of my own plays, but it's the truth. I never did like it. I wish I'd never finished it."

I thought I ought to say something. "It seems to be a pretty big hit."

"It's making money, if that's what you mean, but it has caused me a great deal of trouble, a great deal." Remington glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. Then lowering his voice, he said, "In fact, this trouble is my reason for bringing you here today." He motioned toward the sofa. "Sit down, Mr. Drake." I sat down on the red leather sofa and lit a cigarette. Remington remained standing with his back to the fireplace. He clasped and

unclasped his hands nervously. Finally he said, "First, I want to thank you for coming here with no more information than I furnished in the note."

I shrugged. "Two hundred dollars is pretty persuasive. Most of my clients aren't so thoughtful."

A faint smile played over his mouth. "No, I suppose not." The smile went away, a worried frown replaced it, and he went on, "But, on the other hand, I doubt if many of your clients have problems as serious as mine."

"Maybe you'd better tell me about it."

He nodded. "You know, of course, who my wife is?"

"Of course."

Remington's eyes left my face and turned in the direction of the garden. "I love her very much, Mr. Drake, and she loves me even more if that is possible. For twenty-five years we've lived and worked together. Not once in all those years have we had a serious difference or quarrel, and never has there been the slightest mistrust or misunderstanding on either of our parts. Our only separations have been short and due to the nature of our profession." He stopped talking and looked back at me. I puffed on my cigarette and waited for him to continue. I purposely kept the expression on my face blank and wooden. When he didn't see sympathy and understanding in my eyes, his voice became uncertain and worried. "I know that sounds unbelievable and ridiculous, almost trite, but it's the truth. Although we're both prominent and in the same profession, there has never been the slightest jealousy between us. Oh, I know what the public thinks about people like us, and God knows they've reason enough in most cases. But what

I'm trying to tell you is that it isn't always that way, at least not with Peg and me. Do you understand what I mean, Drake?"

"I think so."

A second of silence passed while he watched me closely. Then he nodded. "Yes, I think you do understand." He paused thoughtfully again, and I got the feeling that he was embarrassed. In a man less used to hiding and showing emotions at will, it would have been obvious. The fact that it showed at all told me that John Remington was very upset. Slowly and deliberately he drew a long, silver cigarette case from his pocket, took out a cigarette, and lit it. Smoke trailed from his nose and mouth as he spoke. "I'm telling you this, Drake, because I want you to understand that my difficulty is more serious than it would be in the ordinary person."

"I understand," I said. "Suppose you tell me just exactly what this difficulty is."

Remington spread his hands helplessly. "As I've just told you, Peg and I have been happily married for twenty-five years. She trusts me implicitly, almost in a childlike way. In all that time nothing has ever come between us."

"And now something has?"

He nodded, and a look of actual pain crossed his handsome face. "Yes. I'm being blackmailed."

"I see," I said slowly. "And you've hired me to find out who the blackmailer is?"

He shook his head. "No. I know only too well who the blackmailer is. At least I know who one of them is."

"There's more than one?"

"Yes, I think there are two."

I reached over and ground out my cigarette in an ash tray. "What have they got on you?"

He dropped his eyes and looked at the cigarette between his fingers. "It's pretty bad," he said in a low voice.

"Is it a frame?"

"No, it's no frame. They've got something on me."

"That's not so good. What have they got?"

He dropped his cigarette into the fireplace where it lay smoking on the empty hearth. Then he walked slowly over and sat in the red leather chair. One hand rubbed nervously at his chin, and he kept his eyes turned towards the garden. "They've got a photograph," he said in a low voice, "a very foul, filthy, compromising picture of a woman and me."

"It could easily be a fake."

He shook his head and looked at the floor. "No, it's not a fake. I know well enough when the picture was taken." He buried his face in his hands, and his voice sank lower still. "God, how could I ever forget it."

"I see."

He looked up at me pleadingly. "Now you understand? You see how horrible it is? If Peg should ever see that picture, if they sent it to her, it would kill her." His voice dropped lower as he added, "And me, too."

"You've seen the picture yourself?"

"Yes. They sent me a print." A shudder passed over his face. "I burned it immediately. There was a note, too. It said simply that they had the negative and suggested that I might like to buy it before it was offered for sale to my wife."

"Did they name a price?"

"Yes. Five thousand dollars. I paid the money immediately in good faith."

"But they didn't give you the negative?"

Remington's shoulders sagged hopelessly, and he once more looked at the floor. The famous voice was weary and dead. "No. They merely sent another print, and said they had decided that the negative was worth much more."

"Paying blackmail never cured anything."

"I know that now. That's why I've hired you, Mr. Drake."

"Just what do you expect me to do?" I asked.

He leaned toward me eagerly, almost pathetically. "I want you to get that negative and all the prints they have of it."

"That's a pretty big order, Mr. Remington."

He got up and moved several steps towards me. "They've asked ten thousand dollars for the negative this time. If you can get the negative and all the prints for me, I'll pay *you* the ten thousand dollars."

I leaned slowly back on the sofa and tried to keep the wooden expression on my face and the startled surprise out of my voice. "And if I don't?"

"You'll still be paid well enough if you make every effort. You can judge by the money I ordered Jova to give you. Is that all right?"

I took a deep, slow breath, got up from the sofa, and walked thoughtfully over to the door to the garden. I wanted him to think I hadn't made up my mind. It was a swell offer, the best I'd ever had in my life. Ten thou-

sand dollars is a lot of money. It was good all right, too damned good. Remington backed slowly over to his chair and sat on the edge of it, watching me anxiously. Ten seconds of silence was all he could stand. Finally he said, "Well, what do you say?"

"It'll be tough," I answered, "plenty tough."

"But you'll try?"

"Okay, I'll try." A relieved expression came over his face, and he sank back in his chair. I went over to the sofa again, sat down, and became very businesslike. "Give me all the facts, the whole story. Don't hold anything back. If I'm going to help you, I've got to have the truth. I don't suppose I need to tell you that anything you tell me is strictly confidential."

"I'll tell you the truth," he said simply.

"Good. Start at the beginning."

Remington nodded, lit another cigarette, and began talking in a low, nervous voice. "It all started with my production of *Nightwind*, or rather that's where I first met the girl. I'm not sure, of course, but I think that even then the whole thing was planned. I mean I think that's why she took the job."

A strange feeling of "all this having happened before" crossed my brain, but my voice was casual and businesslike. "The girl's in the show?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

He shot a quick, curious glance at me, but what he saw must have satisfied him. He puffed deeply on his cigarette and then said slowly, "Her name is Tucker Calhoun."

chapter seven

IT didn't surprise me.

I guess I'd been expecting it all along. New York is a big city, and it has a lot of private detectives. Maybe it really was a coincidence, but I wanted to be sure. I inhaled the smoke from my cigarette and watched Remington's face. If he was disappointed that the name apparently hadn't rung a bell, he didn't show it. The worried half-frown was still there, and he looked exactly like a guy who has an embarrassing story to tell and who doesn't quite know how to go about it. It would have satisfied me on anybody else, but John Remington was a swell actor. I decided not to mention the events of the night before, at least not yet. "You say you'd never met this girl before she got a part in the show?"

"No. Oh, I might have seen her before, but I didn't remember her. She doesn't actually have a part in the play. She's the general understudy for the women's parts. She was recommended by a fairly well-known agent who has done casting for me before."

"Then she really *is* an actress?" I asked.

He looked up quickly and nodded. "Oh, yes, she's

been in the theatre for some time. There's no doubt about that. She has no great talent for acting and evidently has never achieved much success, but she was quite adequate for the job of understudy. On the other hand she is an extremely beautiful woman and has an unbelievable physical attraction for men"—his voice dropped—"which I found out only too well."

"Go on," I said. "What happened?"

"We rehearsed for over four weeks here in town. I directed the play myself so I had to be at rehearsal every day. Naturally I saw a great deal of Miss Calhoun although we were never alone together. Her manner and appeal were so obvious that I rather made a point of avoiding her though I admit I was strongly attracted to her as was every other man connected with the play. On several occasions I knew that she was deliberately playing up to me, but it isn't really unusual, you know, for a beautiful unknown actress to do that to the writer or director of a play." Remington stopped, reached for an ash tray, and ground out his cigarette.

"When and how did it finally happen?" I asked.

"In Detroit, the night the play opened."

"You didn't open cold in town then?"

"No. We were on the road four weeks before we came in. Of course, I went along to see that everything ran smoothly. Usually in cases like that Peg comes along with me if she isn't working. This time, although she had no engagement at the time, she decided against it and instead went up to Maine to see her mother who is quite elderly and not too well." He shook his head slowly. "I

should have known better. I should have suspected what might happen."

"Just what *did* happen?"

"I'm coming to that. The night the play opened I gave a party at my hotel for the cast. Usually I'm a light drinker, but that night something came over me. I suppose it was the girl, Tucker Calhoun. All along she'd been on my mind although I hadn't admitted it to myself. It wasn't love or anything like that, you understand. It was just plain lust. I wanted her, and I wanted her badly. She, of course, knew it." Remington looked up at me helplessly. "And believe it or not, Drake, I'm not like that. I swear I'm not." He bent forward earnestly. "In all my married life I'd never been unfaithful to Peg before."

"I believe you," I told him.

A tired expression came over his features and he went on slowly, "The party was in my suite; and as I've already told you, I got quite tight; in fact, I guess I was drunk. Even now it isn't all too clear to me, that is the part that led up to it." Remington drew a fine linen handkerchief from his pocket and mopped at his forehead. He looked completely miserable. I decided the thing was really a coincidence after all and began feeling genuinely sorry for him. Actor or no actor, those beads of perspiration on his face were the real thing. After a second or two of silence, he spoke again. "I remember that everybody had gone except Tucker, and I was kissing her. She was . . . was . . . I don't quite know how to explain it. I'd never known a woman like that before. I didn't know there *were* women like her. She set me on

fire, drove me crazy. I was like a madman. I tried to persuade her to stay there, but she insisted we go to her own room which was in the same hotel on a different floor. I know now why. I thought, too, at the time that she was as drunk as I. Obviously she wasn't at all. The man must have been waiting in the cupboard of her room with the loaded camera."

"You're sure it was a man?"

"Positive, although I didn't see his face. It all happened so fast and I was so startled that it was like a fleeting dream sequence. It actually wasn't until the picture was sent to me that I really believed it had happened." He looked at me. "I don't have to tell you any more, do I?" Remington buried his face in his hands again, and for a minute I thought he was crying. He wasn't, however, and in a second or two he raised his head and said, "And that's about all there was to it. At that time I don't think I really knew just what had happened, and I had no idea that Tucker was mixed up in it. Nothing else happened until a week ago. That's when the first note and picture arrived. Even then I didn't suspect Tucker. I merely thought it was a blackmail gang who preyed on prominent people who happened to be indiscreet in hotel rooms. Later, of course, when I began putting the whole thing together, I knew that the girl must be in on it, too."

"But you never mentioned it to her?"

"No. I guess I was afraid to. Besides she undoubtedly would have denied it." His eyes dropped to the floor again. "You see I never mentioned anything to her about that night, I mean afterwards. It was just as if nothing at all had happened between us. Of course, I avoided her

during the rest of our out-of-town run; but she acted just as she always had before."

"Then you aren't actually positive that the girl *was* in on it?"

"If you mean, do I have concrete proof, no. But it was all too pat, the man hiding in the room, her insisting we go to *her* room when it would have been much more convenient to stay in my own suite. No, Drake, I'm sure she was an accomplice." He lifted his eyes questioningly. "What do *you* think?"

I nodded slowly. "From what you've told me I'd say you're probably right. The girl was the lure in a very up-to-date badger game." I was remembering the short conversation I'd heard in the hall outside the Washington Roof the night before. "This Calhoun girl is still with the show?" I asked.

"Certainly. I was afraid to fire her."

"Does your wife know her?"

"Well, she's met her just as she's met every other member of the cast. Why do you ask that?"

"I was wondering if your wife would remember her face." I stopped and glanced at Remington, then added, "If she happened to see that picture."

His head jerked up with a snap, and he half rose from his seat. His face was etched with fear and his voice was hoarse. "My God, man, what are you thinking of? Peg mustn't ever see that picture. It wouldn't make any difference at all whether or not she remembered the girl's face."

"Mr. Remington, pornographic pictures are framed every day by superimposing. Even if it were the real

thing, you could call in the police and bluff it out as a frameup."

Remington's face was chalk white. He got all the way to his feet and moved a step toward me. "Good Lord, no," he half whispered. "Peg would never believe that. Besides, I'm sure she'd remember Tucker's face. She'd know we had been on the road together." He shook his head vehemently. "No, that's out, definitely. We can't go to the police, and Peg mustn't ever know." He stood there watching me uncertainly for several seconds, then he added in a low intense voice, "She mustn't *ever* know. Do you understand, Drake?"

"Okay," I said. "Have it your way, but I still think it's best to go to the police in these matters."

"No."

I let my voice get just a little sarcastic. "Have you any suggestions as to how I'm to get this negative back?"

He missed the sarcasm, and his voice became uncertain. "No, not exactly. I thought you'd know about those things yourself."

I began getting sore. "How the hell do you expect me to get hold of it if I don't even know who the blackmailers are."

"Well, you know who the girl is."

"Okay, I know about the girl. Granted she was in on it, but she was only the lure, a tool for the real blackmailer. You said there was a man in it. More likely there are half a dozen men, a whole gang who specialize in that sort of thing. They'd have the pictures."

"I never thought of that. I supposed that knowing who the girl was . . ."

"You mean you think I could buy her off, make her double-cross the others?"

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Not exactly, but it's a very good idea. She's the type who might do that. But that wasn't what I meant. I thought perhaps she might just happen to have the negative in her own apartment. Mightn't a clever blackmailer or gang of blackmailers think her apartment was a good hiding place? They might think nobody would look there." The shadow of a reprimanding smile flicked over his mouth. "After all, Drake, you thought exactly that."

I had to admit he had me there, but I don't like being made to look like a sap. It always makes me sore. My mouth twisted into a sneer. "So maybe this girl does have the negative and prints. What do I do? Ring her doorbell, offer to buy her off separately, then if she refuses, slug her and search the apartment?"

"I rather thought of it the other way around," said Remington seriously. "You see, I hadn't thought of buying her off separately."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I hired you, I rather had in the back of my mind that you might get into the apartment and search it."

I stared at him incredulously. "Look," I said, "you've got the wrong guy. I'm a private detective, not a second-story man."

Remington looked hurt. "I don't mean it just the way it sounds." He shrugged ruefully. "I guess I really hadn't thought too much about how you'd do it. I took for

granted you'd know about those things, have some method of your own."

"You mean like posing as the Fuller Brush man?"

Somehow he still missed the sarcasm in my voice. "Something like that I suppose. I didn't know you fellows were so particular or"—he paused, searching for the right word—"or . . . or ethical."

"It's not a matter of ethics. It's against the law to housebreak in this town. If I got caught, I could get five years."

Remington looked at me with something like contempt in his eyes. "Surely a man with your experience doesn't have to be caught, does he?"

He was getting my goat, and he knew it. "Hell, no," I said, "but there's always the chance."

Remington kept his eyes on me. "Besides, I'd hardly call it wrong to break into or enter such a person's home for the purpose I've mentioned. After all, you detectives do do that sort of thing, don't you?"

"Sure," I said dryly. "Most of us would jump off Brooklyn Bridge, too, for enough money."

Hope came quickly into his eyes. "I've already told you I'd pay you very well. I meant it."

I watched him narrowly. "You said you'd give me ten thousand if I got the negative and prints. You didn't mention any set fee if I failed."

He came quickly across the room and stood in front of the sofa, looking eagerly down at me. "How much do you want to search her apartment?"

I didn't want to do it or have any part of it, but he'd accomplished his purpose. He'd made me sore and I'd

gone too far to back out. "I want a thousand dollars," I said, and then added, "right now."

"I'm afraid I'll have to give you a cheque. Will that do?"

I frowned and thought about it. "Okay," I said finally, "I guess it'll have to do." Remington went to the desk, drew a large cheque book from a drawer, and wrote hurriedly. Then he tore out the cheque, blotted it, and handed it to me. I looked it over and put it in my wallet along with the two hundred dollars Jova had given me earlier. Twelve hundred dollars is plenty of money to make in one morning. It was more money than I'd made in the last three months, and I'd considered them damned good months at that. Still I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. Remington stood by the desk, watching me anxiously. I reached in my coat pocket and drew out a pad and pencil. "Do you know the girl's address?" I asked.

"Oh, yes." Remington took a slip of paper from his pocket. "I got it from our stage manager yesterday." He handed me the piece of paper. The name Tucker Calhoun was written on it and beneath it the words, "Two Twenty-two Gramercy Park."

"Do you know where it is?" asked Remington.

"Sure, I know that section pretty well. It's around Twentieth Street between Third and Fourth."

Remington nodded. "That's right. It's only about twelve or thirteen blocks from here, as a matter of fact."

I folded the paper slowly, put it in my pocket, and picked up my hat. "I don't like the job," I said, "but you've paid me, and I'll go through with it. If the negative and prints are there, I'll get them for you."

"I certainly hope so." Remington looked at the hat in my hand.

"I suppose that even though the girl is only the understudy she has to be at the theatre every night?"

"Yes, she has to check in and wait until all the cast appears. We try to keep her there all through the show in case something happens, but according to her contract she only has to check in."

"Good," I said. "I'll make my play this evening after she's gone to the theatre. Then we'll be sure she's out of the way."

A worried frown showed on Remington's face. "That's a good idea, but I'm afraid it won't do unless I want to pay an extra ten thousand dollars."

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. "Why not?"

Remington went back and sat on the edge of the red leather chair again. "I must have forgotten to tell you. They want this next money by three o'clock this afternoon. If you're going to find the negative and prints, you'll have to find them before then."

My hand came away from the door and I walked slowly over to the sofa, still holding the hat in my hand.

"That's bad," I said. "It doesn't give me much time."

"I'm sorry," Remington said. "I guess I just forgot to tell you that. There was so much else to explain."

I tossed the hat angrily on the sofa and stood there looking down at him. "Like hell you did. You knew I'd turn down the job if I realized I only had a couple of hours to do it in, so you hooked me first and saved the worst for the last. Well, you guessed wrong."

He got up and put his hand on my arm. "You're not going to back out?"

I laughed. "What do you think?"

"But you can't. You took my money and the cheque."

"What kind of a sap do you take me for?" I looked at my wrist watch and pointed at it. "It's eleven-fifteen now, and you're supposed to give them the money by three. That means that to do any good I'd have to have the negative here by two at least. That's a little over two hours to play with. I'm not Houdini."

"But she may not be at home now. She may be out shopping or something."

"Sure," I sneered, "all actresses get up early in the morning, especially when they deal in blackmail as a sideline. Nuts!" I reached in my hip pocket and brought out my wallet.

Remington's voice became pleading. "You might trick her out of her apartment some way if she is there now."

I opened the wallet, took out the cheque and two hundred-dollar bills, and laid them on the desk. Remington sank back into his chair and closed his eyes. His face was grey and tired. He looked like an old man. When he spoke, his voice was dead, resigned. "You win, Drake. Do it your own way. I'll pay the extra ten thousand to them this afternoon. It may be that they'll really play square this time."

I stood there feeling like a heel. I also began feeling like a guy who has just tossed eleven thousand, two hundred dollars down the drain. After all, it might not be so tough to pull off at that. "Oh, hell," I said and picked up the cheque and bills.

Remington opened his eyes and sat up. "You *will* do it?"

"I feel sorry for you," I said.

He got up and came over to me. He took my hand and shook it. His eyes were so grateful I almost felt like crying. "Thank you, Drake, thank you," he said in a husky voice.

"Skip it. Save the thanks until I get back." I looked at my wrist watch again. "You say you were to give them the money this afternoon by three?" He nodded. "How do you make the pay-off?"

"The last time, the time I paid five thousand, my instructions were to wait for a telephone call. I did so. When it came, a man's voice told me to put the cash in an envelope and walk immediately over to Washington Square. He told me to sit down on a certain bench, put the envelope down, and walk away without looking back. I was to return for the negative in ten minutes. I did and found a print with another note, the one I told you about, saying they'd changed their minds."

"Are your instructions the same this time?"

"Yes, I'm to wait here for a telephone call."

"They sound like professionals all right."

"How can you tell that?" asked Remington.

"The telephone call. They wait until the last minute to give you your instructions. That's so you can't tip off the police."

"Oh," said Remington in a weak voice, "I hadn't thought of that. Of course," he added quickly, "as I told you, I wouldn't call in the police."

"Yeah, but they don't know that; in fact, they may be

watching your house. If that's the case, they've undoubtedly spotted *me*."

Remington looked worried again. "What will you do?"

"I don't know. If we trick the girl out of her apartment, I'll have to move fast and I probably won't have time to throw a tail. It's just a chance we've got to take. Since they were so lucky on the first try, they may not be too careful this time."

"That's true," he said thoughtfully. "How do you intend getting Tucker out of her apartment if she's there?"

"A telephone call would be best. Does she have a phone?"

"I don't know." He turned and walked over to a telephone stand in the corner. "I'll look in the book and see." He pulled out the Manhattan book from beneath the small table and began thumbing through it. I lit a cigarette and waited. A slight frown wrinkled his forehead as he hurriedly ran his finger down one of the pages. Suddenly the frown left his face. "Yes," he said, "she's listed."

I got up, walked over and picked up the phone. "What's the number?" I asked. Remington looked back in the book, ran his finger down the page again, bent lower and read off a number with a Gramercy exchange. I dialled it and leaned back against the wall, waiting. Remington closed the book and put it back in its place under the table. The droning sound of the ring came over the wire; once, twice, three times it rang. I put my hand over the mouthpiece and said, "Looks like we're in luck. I don't think she's in." The ring sounded again, methodical and lonesome. Across the room Remington's eyes lighted up with hope.

"Good," he said. "You can go right over and . . ."

"Wait a second. I want to be sure. We'll give her . . ." There was a click as the receiver was lifted at the other end of the wire. A woman's voice, thick with sleep, said irritably, "Yes?"

I took my hand away from the mouthpiece, and from the corner of my eye saw the hope disappear from Remington's face. Keeping my voice crisp and businesslike, I said, "Miss Calhoun?"

"Yes, this is Miss Calhoun." She cleared her voice, and I got a mental picture of the girl I'd seen the night before, only this time I saw her sitting at a telephone clutching a flimsy negligée about her beautiful figure. I wondered if she had on slippers. Somehow I was sure she was sitting in her living room barefooted.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you, but . . ."

Her voice cut in impatiently, "Who is this?"

"You don't know me," I said. "My name is Foster. I'm an intern at Bellevue Hospital."

"What's wrong?" The voice woke up fast and became laced with fright. "A man was just brought into the emergency ward in a very critical condition."

A low moan came over the wire. "Oh, my God! No! Who . . . who is he?"

"We don't know. He has no identification on him. We found a card in his pocket, however, with your name and phone number written on it, so we thought perhaps you could identify him."

"But . . . what does he look like? Is he . . ."

I cut in fast. "I'm afraid you'd better come down and see him yourself."

"Yes, yes, of course." Her voice was flustered with fear and shock. "I . . . I've only just waked up. I'll have to dress."

"You'd better hurry. He's in pretty bad shape."

"But what happened to him? I . . . I mean was he shot?"

"Shot?" The surprise in my voice was real enough.

"I mean . . . I thought * . . when you said he'd been brought in in a critical condition I naturally thought . . ."

"No, he wasn't shot. He was hit by a car." She started to say something, but I overrode her. "You'd better hurry."

"Yes, yes. I'll be there as soon as I can get dressed."

"Okay," I said. "Just ask for Dr. Foster in the emergency ward."

"Yes, Dr. Foster." The receiver clicked on the other end of the wire, and I put the phone back in its cradle.

Remington was looking at me with admiration in his eyes. "That was smart. I never would have thought of that."

"It's an old trick, but it works every time." I glanced at my wrist watch. "It's eleven-thirty now. I'll get a cab and go right over to her apartment."

"Jova could drive you over."

I shook my head. "A cab is better. I don't want to get there too soon. She should be out in fifteen minutes. Besides she might spot your car."

"I suppose you're right," Remington said uncertainly. And then added, "As a matter of fact, Jova has probably already gone uptown to pick up Peg."

"Is your wife rehearsing a new play?" I asked.

"No. She went uptown early this morning to do some shopping. I wanted her out of the house if possible while I talked to you and also when the phone call came from the blackmailers. The shopping luckily was her own idea. However, I asked a friend of ours to invite her to lunch. Jova was to meet her and take her there."

I nodded. "By the way, is your phone listed?"

"Not this one." Remington indicated the telephone I'd just used. "Our office number is in the book, but this one is private."

"You'd better give it to me."

"Yes, of course." He went to the desk and wrote on a slip of paper, and handed it to me. I folded it, moved toward the closed door, and heard a low, quick sound of movement outside in the hall. Apparently Remington hadn't heard the noise. He stood with his back to the fireplace watching me. "Good luck," he said. Instead of answering him, I yanked the door open and stepped into the hall. He came halfway across the room, stopped, and asked in an uneasy voice, "What's wrong, Drake?"

"Nothing," I said. "But I'd better get going. It won't take her too long to check that Bellevue gag."

Remington's face relaxed, but he still looked old, tired, and sick. I felt sincerely sorry for him. I guess that's why I didn't tell him that I'd caught a glimpse of a woman disappearing into a room at the other end of the hall, a woman who had been listening outside the closed door of the study, a woman whom I had no trouble recognizing . . . John Remington's wife, Margaret Tulane.

chapter eight

THERE weren't any cabs in sight when I reached the corner of Tenth Street and Fifth Avenue. While I waited for one to come along, I thought over Remington's story and the quick view I'd gotten of his wife. The fact that he thought she was uptown when she wasn't made it pretty certain that she'd been eavesdropping outside the door; and the fact that she was eavesdropping made it even more certain that she knew something about her husband's trouble. I wondered how long she had been there and how much she had heard. Of course, there was always the possibility that she had simply come home unexpectedly and had happened to be passing the study just as I opened the door. Even so it would have given Remington a shock if he had seen her, and her presence in the house might complicate the matter of the black-mailer's phone call. I decided to stop worrying about it. After all it wasn't any of my business whether Remington's wife was wise to him or not. I'd been hired to get the negative and prints, and that was all. That was all; that was plenty.

A cab rolled out of Ninth Street and headed in my

direction. I flagged it down, got in, and decided I wouldn't want to be in John Remington's shoes in spite of all his fame and money. Ten minutes later I paid off the cab at Twentieth Street and Fourth Avenue and started walking slowly down the half block that leads into Gramercy Square. When I reached the southwest corner of the little park, I stopped and looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to twelve. That meant that about twenty minutes had passed since my phone call to the girl. I glanced at the numbers of the nearest buildings and saw that they ran counterclockwise around the Park. That would put Two Twenty-two near the end over on the west side of the Park. Taking my time, I strolled in that direction staying on the park side of the street next to the picket fence. Halfway down the block I spotted it, one of those old, cool-looking buildings with iron grille balconies, four stories, and a history. Back during the nineties it would have been the home of a wealthy family; now it would be cut up into four or five nice roomy apartments that brought a higher rent than the plumbing warranted. What was lacking in modern fixtures and swank would be more than made up for by the privacy of the locked restricted park across the street and the calm dignity of Gramercy Square.

Somehow it didn't seem like the sort of place that went with the picture I'd formed of Tucker Calhoun. I put it down to the housing shortage, stopped, took off my hat and mopped my forehead with my handkerchief. It wasn't an act. The sky was cloudless, and the midday August sun glowered down on the sweltering city like a frustrated dictator. It gave me time to look the street

over carefully. It was empty. While I lit a cigarette, I ran my eyes over the inside of the park. The only occupants were a couple of kids who had energy enough to play while their mothers sat on near-by benches and read the latest best sellers.

I decided nobody was going to pay any attention to me, much less remember me, and crossed the street to number Two Twenty-two. Several well-worn stone steps led up to what was apparently the entrance of a vestibule. The door stood open. I went up the steps and inside. A row of mailboxes lined one side of the wall, and a closed door barred the way into the first-floor hallway of the building. Below each of the mailboxes was a buzzer button and a small holder for calling cards or nameplates. There were five of them, and all the holders had names in them. Tucker Calhoun's name was neatly engraved on an expensive-looking card in the second one from the end. Below the engraving, the letters "2B" were neatly written in green ink. I pressed hard on the buzzer and waited. Ten seconds passed and nothing happened. I pressed again, this time longer and harder. Somewhere deep inside the house, the faint drone of the bell fought the stillness. Seconds of silence again. Across the street in the park one of the kids suddenly started bawling. He screamed as if he'd just had his leg shot off and then stopped abruptly. For the third time I leaned on the buzzer.

A car went by in the street behind me. I waited until it passed and then put my finger against another buzzer two boxes away from Tucker Calhoun's. Before I had time to press it a second time, the closed door in front of

me sprang into sudden life with a violent clicking sound. Somebody upstairs was pressing the release button that unlocked it. I walked over, shoved the door open, and stepped into the cool, musty dimness of an old-fashioned hallway. A wide, carpeted staircase led up to the second floor. Beside it, the narrow hall ran off into darkness. With my left hand I held the door open behind me. The clicking noise stopped abruptly, and an elderly woman's voice called down from somewhere far above, "Who is it?"

I cleared my throat politely and spoke in a loud voice. "I'm representing a new laundry, and I'd . . ."

"What?" The woman's voice became suspicious.

I raised my voice a little more. "I said I'm representing a new laundry, and I'd like to talk to you about . . ."

"I've got a laundry already. They suit me fine."

I became persistent. "I understand that, Madam, but I'm sure I can . . ."

"No!"

I became pleading. "But I'm sure . . ."

Her voice took on an angry tone. "I said no. Now go away or I'll call the janitor."

"Okay, okay," I said hurriedly. My hand let go of the doorknob, and the door slammed shut behind me. I held my breath and didn't move. One, two, three seconds went by, and then far above, another door banged shut. I smiled and moved silently towards the stairs. As I reached automatically for the banister, the quick patter of a woman's footsteps sounded in the hall above. My foot left the bottom step, and I slid sideways towards the hallway on my right, pressing close against the banisters.

Someone was in a hurry, a big hurry. I stopped moving and waited, hoping she wouldn't see me. A full-swing skirt came into view, then a well-manicured young hand clutching the banister. It was a left hand, and it wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

A nice slim figure came into sight. It wouldn't ever win any beauty contests but it had individuality. She was looking back over her left shoulder and half-biting her lower lip. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, and her soft brown hair hung nearly to her shoulders in a sensible, natural bob. Her other hand clutched a handbag against her breast.

Five steps from the bottom she snapped her face around, stopped biting her lip, and saw me. Her large, serious, grey-green eyes were wide open with what looked a lot like fright. The hand on the banister flew to her mouth, and she tried to stop without telling her feet about it in time. One heel caught in the rug and she started to fall. The hand holding the handbag let go, and she grabbed frantically at the handrail. The handbag flew out of her hand, slapped against the wall, opened and clattered to the floor at the foot of the stairs in a heap of feminine disorder. The girl's body twisted dangerously, then righted, and she half sank to one knee still clutching the banister and trying to keep her frightened, startled eyes on my face. Before I could get up the stairs to help her, she rose to her feet. "I . . . you . . . I . . ." she said. It wasn't much, and it sounded uncertain and flustered; but you could see what a pleasant voice it would be normally. Her face wasn't really beautiful or pretty; it was intelligent and well-bred without

being haughty or snobbish. There was a sort of clean wholesomeness about her that I liked. You don't often see it in New York.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," I said.

"It's all right. I . . . I guess I was in a hurry and didn't expect to see you standing there." She added rather lamely, "I'm late." Her voice had a taut, strained sound. It could have been pain or near hysteria.

"Did you hurt yourself?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, no, I'm quite all right." She moved past me down the stairs and began hurriedly gathering up the purse and its spilled contents. I got down and helped her. When we had it all picked up, she dumped it in the bag, murmured, "Thank you," and went quickly out the front door to the street. I stood there at the foot of the stairs for a second, wondering who she was and why she was in such a hurry and if she lived there in the building. Somehow I hoped she did. She'd looked like a nice girl—the kind of girl you'd be proud to introduce to your grandmother. I don't have a grandmother, but then I don't know many nice girls either. I wondered why and turned to go up the stairs. On the third step I noticed a folded piece of paper. Thinking it might be something important that had fallen from her bag, I bent over and picked it up. It was an unpaid hotel bill from the Beekman Towers for eight dollars and sixty cents. The bill was made out to Miss Josephine Hockaday. So she lived at the Beekman, and her name was Josephine Hockaday. Jo Hockaday. Nice name. Nice girl. The Beekman is even a pretty nice hotel.

I folded the bill, put it in my pocket, and went up the stairs to the second floor. The hall was empty and quiet. There were two apartments on the floor, one at the back and one in front. The letters 2B belonged to the one in front. I walked quietly over and stopped close to the door, listening. No sound came from inside. The silence seemed like the real thing, not the tense, strained silence you feel when somebody is breathing noiselessly and waiting on the other side of a closed door. When you've been in my business as long as I have, you get so you can sense those things sometimes. I took another quick look up and down the hall, saw that it was empty, reached in my pocket for my ring of passkeys, and from force of habit, automatically tried the doorknob with my other hand. The door was unlocked. I wasn't really surprised. A girl like Tucker Calhoun might easily forget to lock her door if she had been frightened and gone out in a hurry.

I pushed the door open, and found myself in a large, gloomy, high-ceilinged living room. I closed the door softly and looked around. A low-slung, velvet-covered couch lolled invitingly along the wall. It wouldn't sleep six people comfortably, but two couples would have plenty of privacy. A rug that could have given the couch competition covered the floor. Across the room three tall, mournful windows, their backs to the sunny park outside, gazed sleepily through heavy-lidded Venetian blinds into the room. Soft dark-coloured drapes framed the windows. There were enough chairs and tables in the room, but none that a man would like. In one corner, a bookcase with the right books looked embarrassed and

out of place. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, not quite big enough for The Met and as useless as a small glass of liquor. A couple of intimate floor lamps did the practical work of lighting. Right now they were sleeping it off; they didn't look as if they ever got up early. A delicate but stale, perfumy, feminine odour hung over the room. It needed airing; it needed cleaning, too. Several messy ash trays overflowed from the night before, and most of the closely smoked butts were tinged with lipstick. The few that weren't were the only masculine things in the place.

Three doors opened off the living room. They were all closed. One would be the kitchen, one the bedroom, and the other either a closet or the bathroom. A man would pick the living room as a hiding place but not a woman. A woman, especially one like Tucker Calhoun, would pick the bedroom; it would be a room she knew well and felt safe in. Any of the closed doors could have led to the bedroom. I took the one on my left because it was nearest to where I stood. As I moved towards it, I noticed a faint trickle of light spilling out from a crack near the bottom of the door. It turned out to be the bathroom, one of those old-fashioned, large, windowless affairs where you have to turn on the light no matter what the time of day. A used bath towel huddled damply on the floor near one end of the tub. From the doorway, the other end was hidden by a dressing table. I moved farther into the room and a wet flannel, hanging carelessly on the side of the tub, came into view.

There was something else hanging beside it. At first I thought it was a woman's long evening glove draped

over the tub to dry, and then I realized that no glove has scarlet fingernails. Even in the Army when it's all around you, you always think it's something else, a bundle of old clothes, a lost helmet or a shoe, a hundred other things. I guess it's because you don't want to face it even if you're expecting it; I wasn't expecting it. I stood there not facing it for about fifteen seconds. Then I walked slowly over and looked down into the tub.

She was dead, of course. Just the limp position of the arm hanging over the tub told me that. Don't let anybody kid you. It's only in very rare cases that you have to listen for heartbeats and feel pulses. They look dead; they don't look the way they did before. If you don't believe me, go to the morgue, go to a funeral, go join the police force, wait for the next draft . . . What the hell am I talking about? Okay, it scared me. It made me jittery. It always does. It would you, too. You might throw up. You might even faint. I didn't. But then I'm a tough guy.

I stood there breathing noisily through my teeth, looking down and waiting for my pulse to come back to normal. The pulse was stubborn, but in about thirty seconds I began seeing the thing I was looking at. It was Tucker Calhoun all right. The long black hair was undone. It swirled in a tangled heap around her face. She lay grotesquely, on her left side with her head almost directly under the outmoded water faucet of the tub, and she was stark naked. One long leg stretched helplessly up the incline of the tub. The toes didn't quite reach the top; the other leg was half drawn up as if, even in death, she was anxious to cover her nakedness. A wet piece of soap lay

guiltily several inches from the drawn-up leg. The hand hanging over the tub had evidently been flung out as she fell. There wasn't any water in the tub; but the end near the drain, where her head rested, was slippery with blood. A slow steady drip fell from the faucet into the dark, matted hair. I leaned closer and gingerly touched the blood in the tub. It wasn't quite dry and my finger came away red. That didn't necessarily mean anything though. The rest of the bathtub was damp, the way bathtubs always are when they've been used recently. I touched the hair. It was damp, too, but that could have come from the dripping water as well as blood. Some of the hair was already stiff at the back of the head. I probed gently and looked closer. The back of the skull was crushed like a broken egg. I let my hand move over and touch her cheek. It was still fairly warm.

I rose slowly to my feet and stood looking down at her. She had a beautiful body, the most beautiful I'd ever seen. My eyes fell in turn on the cake of soap, the used towel on the floor, the wet flannel, the wound at the back of her head. A head smashing down on the end of a bathtub would have a wound like that, a crushing, nasty, violent wound, a fatal wound, especially if nobody were there to help. I remembered my conversation with her half an hour earlier. She'd been upset and frightened. She'd just waked up from a sound sleep. She'd said she would hurry. It all fitted perfectly, a woman in a frantic hurry, bathing quickly, a piece of soap in the bathtub, a fast unnoticing step, a sickening crash, then silence while the slow ooze of blood spread in the bathtub and slipped down the open drain. An old story, a common

story! It happens every day. More accidents in the kitchen and bathroom than in automobiles and airplanes put together! *Accidents-in-the-Bathroom Prevention Week!* A little bulky for headlines but a swell idea. It could happen to anybody, even a beautiful bitch with enemies. Just deserts? Retribution? I wondered.

I thought of something and looked quickly around the bathroom. Just a hunch, but a wrong one; the negligée hung neatly from a hook on the door. Maybe it wouldn't have meant anything anyway. A woman like Tucker Calhoun wouldn't mind running around the apartment naked. She probably went to take a bath without it lots of times. It was there anyway so what the hell! You're a sap, Drake! You've been in the racket too long. Yes, you have.

I took out my handkerchief, pushed my hat back on my head, and wiped off my perspiring face. "I hate her more than anything in the world!" "Don't be too sure, sweetheart!" "If I can't have her, so help me God, nobody else is going to have her either!" Nice talk about a girl who was going to slip on a piece of soap and kill herself in a bathtub.

I had another idea. It wasn't even as good as the first one. I thought there might be blood on the top of the bathtub. It seemed there should have been if her head had smacked there. I bent over and looked. There wasn't any. Then I realized it didn't mean a thing, except that it really was an accident. When the head smacked, it didn't stay long enough for the blood to appear in the wound. If there *had* been blood up there, it would have looked phony to a medical examiner. It would have meant some-

body put it there, somebody who didn't know much about cracks on the head except that it's a swell way to kill a person. I decided it was an accident and slowly straightened up.

As I did so, my eyes ran idly along the nude body lying in the tub. It was just plain male curiosity, I guess. If she hadn't been so beautiful, I might not have bothered. I'm glad I did. Something sparkled suddenly, something I hadn't noticed before, something that seemed to be lying near or on her other arm, the one that was still in the tub. The arm lay straight out beside her, the hand pointing down at her feet, palm up. For the third time I leaned over for a closer examination. The thing that sparkled was on her wrist. At first I thought it was a bracelet but it wasn't. When I turned the hand over, I saw that it was an expensive diamond-encrusted wrist watch. It was still running, and the hands pointed to five past twelve. I glanced at my own watch. It said five past twelve. I laid the hand down carefully and felt a tiny shiver shoot up the back of my scalp. Working quickly, I made sure I'd left no fingerprints. Then I left the bathroom exactly as I'd found it and went out of the apartment fast. Hurry or no hurry, a girl like Tucker Calhoun would never take a bath with her diamond wrist watch on, but it might easily be the one thing a clever murderer would overlook in trying to make it look like an accident!

chapter nine

JUST outside the door of 2B, I stopped a second and listened. The hallway was quiet and empty. Leaving the door unlocked, as I'd found it, I went quickly down the stairs and out into the street. Over in the park, the kids were still playing, and their mothers were still reading. At Twentieth Street I turned right and headed for Fourth Avenue.

There was a drugstore on the corner. I went inside. There were two phone booths in the rear, both occupied. I lit a cigarette, picked up a magazine from the stand, and waited. The counter was crowded with people eating an early lunch. They were noisy, rattling plates and silver and talking as they ate; they worked in near-by offices and lived in Brooklyn or the Bronx; they made forty dollars a week and had too many children and too little time for lunch. They could even laugh . . . maybe. They didn't know a beautiful girl lay dead in a bloody bathtub a block and a half away. I puffed on my cigarette too fast.

One, two, three minutes passed, and the door of one of the booths opened. A fat, perspiring woman squeezed

her way out. I dropped my cigarette on the floor, stamped it out, and entered the humid cubbyhole. It was far too hot inside to close the door, but I closed it anyway. The earpiece of the receiver was slippery with sweat, and small beads of moisture ringed the mouthpiece. The air in the booth was hot, stale and foul.

I dropped a nickel in the slot and dialled the unlisted number which Remington had given me. It was answered almost immediately by Remington himself. His voice was low and guarded. "Yes?"

I was certain it *was* Remington, but I didn't want to take a chance. "Is this Mr. Remington?"

"Oh, it's you, Drake." His voice sounded eager and relieved at the same time.

"Yes," I said. "They haven't called you yet?"

"No. As a matter of fact when the phone just rang, I thought it might be they." He went on hurriedly, "What happened? Did you get them?"

"No."

"You're sure they aren't there? Did you search thoroughly?"

"I haven't searched at all."

"But why not? Do you mean you couldn't get in?"

"I got in all right. I've got some bad news for you."

"What?"

"Tucker Calhoun is dead."

There was a second of silence, then Remington's voice came over the wire, unbelieving, incredulous. "What? What did you say, Drake?"

I glanced sideways out of the booth. Nobody was standing near it, but unconsciously I dropped my voice

lower. "She's dead, lying stark naked in the bathtub."

A low gasping sound reached my ear. "Oh, my God, no! What . . . what happened? I mean how . . ."

"It looks as if she was taking a bath in a hurry, opened the drain to let out the water, stepped on a piece of soap as she was getting out and slipped, smashing her head against the end of the tub."

"Oh, my God!" he said again. He sounded dazed, flustered. I didn't blame him. "You haven't told anyone, reported it?"

"Of course not. I got out fast. Somebody else will have to find her."

"Yes, yes." He spoke more to himself than to me. "My God, how awful! What a horrible accident!"

"I said it *looked* like an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"But . . . but you don't think . . ."

"Listen," I said, "it looked as if she'd been taking a bath. It looked very much like that . . . except for one thing. She's wearing a diamond wrist watch on her wrist. She might have slept with it on and probably did, but she wouldn't take a bath with it on."

"But that story about Bellevue . . . she was probably in a hurry. You said so yourself. That's why she must have slipped."

"Forget it," I said. "When the police see that watch and start digging into her private life, they're going to come up with murder and nothing else."

A sudden indistinguishable sound came over the wire. When Remington finally managed to speak, his voice

was choked with fright. "Drake, you've got to go back there."

It was my turn to be surprised. "Are you out of your head?"

"No, no. Listen." Panicky excitement began crowding out the fear in his voice. "Listen, Drake, you've got to go back and look for the negative and prints. Don't you see? Don't you understand what will happen if they're found there? If . . . if she *was* murdered, the police will search her place thoroughly. If they find the negative . . . if they find any of the prints, they'll recognize me. You know they will." Actual terror crept into his voice as the full truth hit him. Even though he kept it low there was a shrill note in it. "They'll think I did it. It's a perfect motive. She was blackmailing me. You've got to go back and find that negative before . . ."

I broke in. "Calm down. You've got nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about!"

"Of course not. Even if they find out about you and point it at you, they couldn't pin it on you because you couldn't possibly have done it."

"I don't understand." He sounded bewildered.

The air in the phone booth was stifling. Sweat was pouring off my face. I could feel it running down the insides of my arms in little rivulets. I drew out my already soaked handkerchief and mopped at my forehead. "Look," I said, "you've got an alibi, a perfect alibi. You couldn't have killed the girl. I was with you, and I talked to her myself at about eleven-thirty. That means she was alive then."

"Of course! I'd forgotten that." Remington's voice was weak with relief.

I went on. "I left you at your house and went straight to her apartment. I got there at ten of twelve. You couldn't possibly have beaten me there, killed her, arranged the setup and left before I arrived. Whoever killed her did it between eleven-thirty and ten of twelve."

"Of course, of course, but . . ."

"Don't worry about *me* either. If you come into it, I'll back you up . . . be your alibi."

"I'm not worried about that. I understand that now but . . ." He hesitated uncertainly.

"But what?" I asked. The heat in the booth was getting me. I was getting mad again.

"But you've still got to go back for the negative."

"Like hell I do. You're in the clear. They can't pin it on you."

"I know that, but if the negative is found, if I'm even connected with it in any way, if they question me and the papers get it, my wife will find it out, the public will know about it; and I'll be ruined, ruined I tell you."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but it's out. I've had enough for one day."

"Please, Drake, please." He was frantic, nearly crying. I felt sorry for him, sorry as hell, but I'm not an idiot.

"No," I said.

There was a sudden sharp buzzing sound on the wire and my coin dropped.

Remington's voice sounded again, frantic, hysterical. "Don't hang up, Drake. Please, please, you've got to do it. I've paid you already."

“Not enough for that.”

His words tumbled out like pebbles from a pail. “I’ll give you a thousand more, even if you don’t find it, if you’ll only search for it.”

A sing-song feminine voice interrupted. “Your time is up. Please deposit another nickel.”

“Okay, Remington, I’ll do it.” The line went suddenly dead, and I sat there in the booth sweating. Evidently I was an idiot, after all!

chapter ten

THE kids and their mothers had gone home to lunch when I walked back into Gramercy Square. The park was empty and quiet under the broiling sun. Three or four doors up on the south side of the Square a taxi rolled to a stop in front of The Players. Two men got out. They both wore straw hats and one of them had on a white linen suit. The one in the white suit carried a cane. They went into the club, and the cab moved away. I walked slowly across the street to the west side of the Square where number Two Twenty-two is, and wished I were still an actor having lunch at The Players.

Two Twenty-two hadn't changed a bit. It was still drowsy, ageing, and cool. I glanced up at the narrow shaded windows on the second floor. It might be a place for ghosts but not for a beautiful dead girl in a bathtub. I went up the worn steps and into the small vestibule for the second time that morning. At first it looked just the same, and then I saw what was different. The inner door, the one opening directly into the hall, wasn't completely closed. It had a snap lock, the kind that automatically clicks shut when the door swings to. Usually the force

of the door-spring is enough to pull it shut; but sometimes, especially in old houses, the spring weakens and doesn't always do the trick. When that happens, the latch rests lightly against the lock without snapping into place. That was what had happened to the door of Two Twenty-two. I stood there for a second looking at the door and wondering. My own apartment is similar and I'd long ago gotten into the habit of automatically sealing the lock with a little extra pull as I went out. I couldn't swear to it, but I was fairly certain I'd done that to the door in front of me when I left.

I looked down at my wrist watch. It was nearly twelve-thirty. I'd noted the girl's wrist watch at five after twelve. I'd stayed another two or three minutes cleaning off fingerprints. That meant I'd left the apartment at about eight after twelve. Give me five minutes at the most to walk to the drugstore, a wait of three or four, then five on the phone and another five to get back. Eighteen or twenty minutes altogether. Not much time but enough for a lot of people to go in and out. Of course there were four other apartments in the building. Four to one! Not bad odds if you aren't afraid of losing. I pulled the door open, went in, and made sure the lock snapped behind me. The house seemed almost unnaturally silent and dead, but that could have been my imagination. I've got a swell one and it was working overtime as I started up the wide, carpeted stairs.

I was on the fourth step when I heard the phone ringing, faint and muffled, somewhere above me. I stopped and listened. It seemed to be coming from the front of the house. I went up several more steps and it rang again,

monotonous and tired as if it was getting bored. You could tell somehow that nobody was going to answer it. It rang again before I reached the second-floor hall, getting louder but still distant and muffled. Ten feet from Tucker Calhoun's door it rang for the fourth time, and I realized it was coming from inside the dead girl's apartment. I stopped outside and listened for it to ring again, but whoever it was that was calling had given up.

The apartment was still unlocked. I went inside, and closed the door behind me. As far as I could see, nothing had changed in the living room. Light still shone from under the bathroom door. I went over and looked inside. The bare arm still hung limply over the side of the tub beside the flannel, and the huddled towel on the floor hadn't been moved.

I closed the door and walked across the living room to one of the other doors. It was the kitchen. She hadn't been a good housekeeper: dirty glasses stood in the sink; crumbs and an open box of Ritz crackers gave the flies a treat on a greasy sideboard. The floor didn't need cleaning quite so badly as the stove did, and some fresh dish towels would have been a pleasant surprise. In one corner a full garbage pail groaned for relief. Its ancient enamelled sides were stained and streaked like the face of a coal-field orphan. I left it to its misery and tried the remaining closed door.

It was the one I wanted; the bedroom. Money had been lavished on it, but it still looked unkept and messy the way rooms of careless, untidy, spoiled women always look. Show me a woman's bedroom, and I'll tell you whether to marry her or not. It wasn't a big room. Prob-

ably in the old days it hadn't even been a bedroom, more likely a sewing room or oversized cupboard or store-room. An expensive unmade bed that couldn't make up its mind whether it was single or double reposed languidly along one wall. The sheets were silk, and the spread which lay half off the bed had cost somebody enough money to deserve better treatment. There was a throw rug on the floor and one open window on the street side. At the foot of the bed a cheap beaverboard cupboard had been built against the wall and painted a robin's egg blue to match the walls. It gave the room a shrinking, suffocating appearance. Against the wall across from the bed there was a frilly, mirrored dressing table and a dainty, ivory-coloured chair that I would have been afraid to sit on. You might have found room to put a penny on the table but not a quarter. It held everything a woman needs and a few things she doesn't, at least in some circles. Stray black hairs, bobby pins and spilled sun-tan powder tried hard to outdo each other as excess baggage. A brief pair of pink panties held down the centre of the throw rug where they'd probably been shed the night before. A pair of high-heeled shoes with silk stockings stuffed carelessly in them slept drunkenly on the floor near the closed cupboard door. A white brassière hung from the back of the little chair. There was no sign of the flowered dress, a girdle or a nightgown. She probably slept raw; and with a figure like hers, a girdle would be about as useful as a match in a blast furnace.

I opened the cupboard door and looked inside. The dress alone had found its home the night before. It hung, not neatly, but on a hanger in the centre of an overcrowded

row of suits, dresses, and coats. They were all beautiful and expensive, the best. No minimum Equity salary or soap-opera commercial had bought them. I went through them quickly and thoroughly. There was no sign of any negative or prints.

I tried the hatboxes on the shelf next. They only held hats, fabulous hats that were a match for the suits and dresses. After that I gave the shoes a whirl. There really weren't many for a girl of her obvious talents, not more than four or five dozen pairs. They lined the floor and the entire back of the door, and they didn't have to be ashamed in front of the other clothes. It was getting boring. Another couple of minutes' work told me the negative and prints weren't anywhere in the cupboard.

I carefully left everything the way I'd found it and moved on to the bed. I went through it slowly and methodically, even turning the mattress and searching for possible slits that had been sewn up. It was wasted time. I rearranged the covers, making them look as nearly like I'd found them as possible.

I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes had passed since I had re-entered the apartment. I went to the dressing table and started going through the drawers. There were eight altogether. I was just closing the third one when I heard a key go into the lock on the door to the hall outside. It went in quickly and easily as if it had been there plenty of times before. It turned, snapping noisily. Somebody twisted the knob and shoved with the assurance that only comes from long practice. Nothing gave, and the key's embarrassment was a thing you could almost feel. It had never happened to the key before. It

was like opening the door to your bedroom and stepping off into space. It just couldn't be. It wasn't possible. The key became angry, and the door rattled impatiently. The owner of the key was used to finding the door locked. He hadn't realized yet that the door had been unlocked, that he had merely locked it by turning the key. He didn't realize it for nearly fifteen seconds. By that time, I'd moved over beside the entrance to the bedroom where I could get a good view of the door to the outside hall without being seen myself.

The lock snapped again, the knob turned, and the door swung in towards me, still obscuring the opening. It hung there a second, then a man stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He moved fast and silently, catlike. The last time I had seen him he'd been wearing a tan gabardine suit and a gun under the left arm; he'd changed from the gabardine to a double-breasted blue summer-weight. I couldn't tell about the gun. His name was Luke Estep, and he was still wearing the same Panama hat he'd had on the night before.

He stood like a statue for several seconds apparently listening. His eyes were fastened on the crack of light under the bathroom door. I stopped breathing and wished I'd brought along a gun. I never wear one unless it's absolutely necessary. Some people don't like horses; they're afraid of them. The horses know it and sneer at them; they take advantage of them. With me, guns are like horses. I don't like rat traps either, but I'll set one and use it if I have to. It's the same with a gun.

Estep stood there for about ten seconds; then instead of going to the door of the bathroom as I thought he

would, he walked across the living room and began searching rapidly through a small writing desk in the corner. He looked through the cubbyholes; he ransacked the drawers; he didn't find what he was looking for. Suddenly he stopped and straightened up. His eyes swung around, passed the bedroom door without seeing me, and stopped again on the bathroom door. His fingers snapped softly as something ^{it}dawned on him. Moving lightly on the balls of his feet, he almost ran across the room.

I moved silently into the living room, leaned against the wall, waited until his hand reached for the doorknob, and then said in what I hoped was a casual voice, "Remembered the wrist watch, huh, Luke?"

His breath hissed out in a startled gasp, and he whirled around facing me. A man without his perfect body coordination would have probably crashed head-on into the door, but not Estep. He landed lightly, feet apart, knees bent in a half-crouch. His eyes were surprised but not scared. His arms hung away from his body, bent slightly at the elbows. His fingers were out straight and spread just a little. He was ready for anything. He looked at me in silence for two seconds, maybe more. I don't remember. I was busy trying not to look as nervous as I felt. Finally he said, "Who the hell are *you*?"

You had to admire him. He was cool and he had guts, plenty of guts. If anybody had surprised me in a murdered girl's apartment, they'd have heard the yell clear out in Kansas City. If I'd had a gun I might have pulled it and started shooting. I said slowly, "The last time you saw me I was a drunk."

His black eyebrows tilted just a little, and he raked his memory unsuccessfully. "I don't get it," he said softly.

"Last night," I said, "at the Washington Roof Garden. Remember?" There was a pause. Then he straightened up out of his half-crouch and took a slow step towards me. His arms came in closer to his body. The fingers weren't spread any more. They looked as if they might turn into fists. His voice became harder but no louder, and for the first time I noticed the faint trace of an East Side accent. "Yeah, yeah," he said slowly, "I remember now." I couldn't tell what he thought of the memory. He went on, and I began to get an inkling. "I thought there was something phony about that drunk business last night."

"I was always a lousy actor. That's why I quit the stage."

It was a poor time for a joke, but he didn't seem to hear it. He spoke almost absently, "That's how you knew my name." I started to nod and he added, "I'm a jerk." I finished the nod. He didn't seem to care which statement it fit. His dark eyes narrowed suddenly, and the voice got even tougher. "Okay, give. What's it all about? Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

My shoulder was getting tired. I wanted to stop leaning against the wall, but I didn't. It gave me poise. A cigarette would have done just as well, but he might have thought I was going for a gun. Somehow I didn't think he'd been wearing his gun the night before for a special occasion. There seemed to be something habitual about it. I crossed one foot carelessly over the other. I tapped the tips of my fingers together speculatively. I eyed him

coldly the way they do in the movies. It made him as jittery as The Great Stone Face.

"Give," he said again and took a step toward me.

"Okay," I said. "My name is Drake. I'm a private detective."

A sneer crossed his face. "Peeper, huh?" I didn't say anything. He shook his head. "Try again, baby. If she'd hired a bodyguard, she would have told him my name."

"I didn't say *she* hired me."

That surprised him. He almost forgot to be tough. "If she didn't hire you, who did?"

"I think you know well enough who my client is."

If he did, he didn't show it. I guessed they were playing a lot of them and watched his face. It didn't tell me anything. I should have watched his hand. It ducked inside his coat and came out fast holding a flat automatic pistol. It was old stuff for the hand; it was used to the movement; it knew what it was doing. A sinking sensation hit my stomach, and the palms of my hands started perspiring. He moved towards me, and the dark-moustached face twisted with anger. "Tell it," he snarled, "tell it, goddamned fast! What are you doing here?"

I took a deep slow breath and hoped he didn't notice it. "I'm looking for the same thing you are."

"The dirty double-crossing bitch!" He spat it out like a bad taste.

I nodded. "Uh huh. Is that why you killed her?"

He stopped moving in my direction. He forgot about the gun in his hand, and it dropped slightly still pointing in my general direction. His swarthy face paled. He looked as if somebody had slugged him in the stomach

with a blackjack. His voice was hoarse, unbelieving. "What did you say?"

"I said did you kill her because she was double-crossing you in the blackmail game?"

"Kill her!" It was just an echoing whisper, full of disbelief.

I uncrossed my feet and stopped leaning against the wall. "You're a swell actor, Luke; better than I am."

"Tucker's dead?" He sounded genuinely shocked and surprised. Somehow it didn't suit his type.

I laughed. Maybe it sounded forced and too loud, but I didn't mind. "Did you remember about the watch before you came back, Luke? Is that why you came? Or did you come back to search some more and then remember the watch while you were going through that desk over there?"

Bewilderment came over his face. It was so good I almost believed it. "Watch? I don't know what the hell you're talking about. You just said Tucker was dead."

"That's right."

The gun came up again. "I don't believe it. You're lying."

"Look over there in the bathroom."

Keeping the gun on me, he glanced over his shoulder at the bathroom door. Then he looked back at me.

"Go on, open it," I said.

For a second he was silent. He stood there raking me with his black eyes. Then he jerked his head towards his left shoulder. "After you, Peeper."

I walked over past him, threw open the door, and pointed at the still white arm hanging over the tub. He

looked at it silently. He didn't make any sound at all, and his face didn't change. Keeping the gun pointed at me, he went into the bathroom sideways and looked inside the tub. I stood by the door, waiting. For thirty seconds he looked at the body in the tub. Then he said over his shoulder, "Accident. It couldn't have happened to a sweeter girl."

"Maybe she deserved it, but it wasn't an accident."

He looked at me incredulously. "You're nuts. It's obvious, plain as day. She was taking a bath and slipped. You can even see the soap."

I grinned. "It's no use, Luke. It was a swell idea and a swell plant, all except the watch."

He was still baffled. "What watch?"

I pointed towards the tub. "The diamond watch on her left wrist. She wouldn't take a bath with that watch on."

Estep leaned quickly over the tub and looked inside. Then he straightened up again. "What the hell are you talking about? There isn't any wrist watch on her arm."

It was my turn to look like a guy who has been black-jacked in the stomach. I went quickly to the tub and brushed Estep aside. I bent over and looked down. He was right. The wrist watch was gone! Estep couldn't have taken it off, not this trip anyway. I'd watched him every second since he had entered the apartment. Behind me I could hear his breathing. "Well?" he said.

I still knelt by the tub looking at the thing inside. "You're right," I said slowly. "It's gone, but it was there twenty minutes ago."

"Sure, sure." He laughed a gentle, little, crooning laugh.

I started to get to my feet without turning around. It was a mistake. I might have seen him swing the sap; as it was, I think I did *hear* it swish through the air. That's how I knew he used a club instead of the gun, that and the fact that the skin behind my ear was bruised but unbroken. He knew how to use it as well as he did the gun. A thousand blinding lights exploded behind my eyeballs. They shot off into darkness and hung there like stars. I watched them for a long, long time. I watched them until my eyes ached with drowsiness. I couldn't watch them any more. I went to sleep.

chapter eleven

I LAY on my back on the bathroom floor. The light was still on. It glared angrily down at my eyes as they opened. I closed them again and fought for memory; it came back slowly and reluctantly; it always does. You think it's all a dream the way you do when a very high altitude hits you. You seem detached, far away, and a little deaf. It scares you, but there's nothing you can do about it. Sometimes it lasts an hour; sometimes until you go to bed that night; sometimes, if it happens often enough, it lasts forever. Punch drunk they call it then. You see them hanging around Madison Square Garden and Stillman's Gym. It's a dream world. They smile a lot, but the smiles are vacant. Maybe it's a happy world. I wouldn't know. I might find out if I don't learn to keep my eyes where they belong. Sappy, that's it. They must have gotten the word from that. Sap . . . sappy. Sure, that's it.

Somebody laughed near by. I opened my eyes again and tried to sit up. Something brushed lightly against my face. It was the dead girl's fingers from the hand hanging over the tub. I shied like a horse at an automobile show.

I crawled clear across to the closed door and sat up, leaning against it for support. A hundred tiny triphammers pounded behind my ear. I touched the spot with my finger. It was sore. I snapped my eyes shut, held them that way a second, then opened them again. The room was clearer. It was empty except for the dead girl and myself. The laugh sounded again, giggly and closer. I realized I was doing it. I stopped. Thirty seconds later I managed to get to my feet. I went to the wash basin and threw water on my face. Then I went to the bathtub and looked inside. She lay exactly the same as before, and the wrist watch was still missing.

That reminded me that time was important. It passes even when you're unconscious. I glanced at my own watch and saw that it was seven minutes after one. I counted back trying to remember. It was still a tough job. I recalled that I'd re-entered the apartment at twelve-thirty. After searching the bedroom cupboard and bed, I'd looked at my watch. Twenty more minutes had passed. That made it ten of one when Estep came in. No more than five minutes could have passed before he slugged me. That meant I'd been out twelve minutes. A lot can happen in twelve minutes. You can listen to a soap opera and one of the commercials . . . if you're silly enough to want to; you can walk a mile; you can call the police and tell them about a murdered girl in a bathtub.

I picked up my hat from the floor and went out of the bathroom fast, leaving the light on and closing the door. The living room was empty. I tried the kitchen next. Nobody was inside. I crossed to the bedroom and looked in. If anybody was there, he was hiding in the cupboard or

under the bed. I didn't think Estep would be foolish enough for that, no matter how badly he still wanted to search the apartment for the blackmail prints and negative. Even so I probably would have looked to make sure if it hadn't been for the buzzer on Tucker Calhoun's apartment door.

It suddenly split the silence of the room, and I jumped a foot. It tore at the quiet like a buzzsaw, ripping and screeching. It sounded like the voice of doom. It sounded like Gabriel's horn, but it didn't sound like the police. Cops don't ring doorbells when they know a body's lying in the bathtub inside.

The buzzer rang again just as I stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind me. This time it sounded short and half-hearted as if the person in the vestibule downstairs knew there wasn't going to be any answer. I went quickly to the banisters of the stairs and looked down. A key fumbled in the door below, then turned, and the door swung open. The slightly overstuffed figure of a woman came into view, silhouetted in the doorway. She was tall and strong looking. She carried a straw bag over one arm and a handbag in her hand. A hat that had stopped caring rested on her head, and a blue faded dress hung well below her knees. She was coloured, but her features were more Indian than Negroid. You could tell it even at this distance. She moved slowly up the stairs, fumbling at her bag and looking exactly like an afternoon maid who knows her mistress is out. On the fourth step she dropped something into the bag and closed it. I backed silently away from the banister and moved over to the stairs leading up to the third floor.

Five steps up, I stopped and waited in the shadows. The coloured woman came on up, puffing a little with exertion. When she reached the second floor, she stopped and wiped her face with the sleeve of her dress. Then she walked down the hall to Tucker Calhoun's apartment, reached for the door, opened it, and went inside. I waited until the door clicked shut behind her. Then I went down the stairs to the front door. I didn't go fast. I walked as if I lived there and was just going out. I took maybe twenty or thirty seconds, but I hadn't heard a scream by the time I reached the street. But then I guess most maids don't go into the bathroom the minute they enter an apartment. They usually start with the bedroom or kitchen.

chapter twelve

A MAID in a black dress and white apron opened the front door of Remington's house when I rang the bell. She had a nice, homey face, and a buxom figure. She looked as if she'd been working there a long time and would be nice to children and dogs. She also looked as if she didn't like me much. She eyed me suspiciously, the same way the taxi driver who brought me from Gramercy Park had done. Maybe it was because of the glassy expression in my eyes or maybe it was the bruise behind my left ear. Maybe it was because I looked like a guy who'd just been sapped by an expert. She moved back a little so she could slam the door easier and said in a disdainful voice, "Yes?"

I might have laughed if my head hadn't been so sore. Instead I said grimly, "I'd like to see Mr. Remington."

"Are you expected?"

"Yes. Just tell him Mr. Drake is here."

She thought that over for a second, then said, "Wait here," and closed the door in my face. I lit a cigarette and waited. In a minute the door was opened again, this time by Remington himself. His face was haggard but

eager. When he saw the bruise over my ear, he pulled me through the door and asked in a low frightened voice, "What happened? Did you find them?" I shook my head and looked questioningly up and down the hall. He took me by the arm and led me into a living room that looked out on the street. The room was empty. He closed the door hurriedly. "We can talk in here. Peg is still uptown, and the servants are all downstairs now. What happened?"

I sat down in a chair and told him everything, leaving out only the part about the night before and the fact that I'd known Estep's name. Remington remained standing with his eyes intently on my face while I talked, and he didn't try to interrupt. When I had finished, he shook his head sadly and sat down. All of the life seemed to have gone out of him. "So you didn't get the negative."

I touched the bruised place behind my ear with my finger. It made me wince. "No," I said, "but neither did the other guy. I think she had the negative all right, and I think she hid it and tried to double-cross him."

Remington shook his head again. "No, you're wrong. She may have hidden it but he must have found it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he called me about ten minutes ago and gave me the instructions about the money; at least I presume it was the same man who came into the apartment while you were there."

"He was bluffing."

Remington lifted his head and looked at me. Hope showed in his sunken eyes. "You think so?"

I nodded. "Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Why?"

"Because he came back to the apartment to look for something. I think it was the negative. He was searching the place when I showed myself."

"But he might have found the negative and prints after he knocked you out."

"It's a hundred to one he didn't. In the first place, I was only out about twelve minutes; in the second place, the apartment didn't look as if he'd gone through it; and in the third place, I don't think he'd hang around after cooling me. After all he didn't know how long I'd be out or who I was, and I'm sure the only reason he put me to sleep was so he could get out of the apartment and leave me."

"You may be right," Remington said uncertainly.

"I'm sure of it."

"What should I do then?" Remington asked. "About the blackmail instructions I mean."

"What were they?"

"The same as before." He looked at his watch. "I should be leaving right now."

"I just told you I think he's bluffing it out. I don't think he's got the negative and prints, but I think he figures he'll find them later. If I were in your place, I'd tell him to go to hell."

"You mean just ignore it, not go?"

"Uh huh. I'd take a chance."

Remington rubbed his hands together nervously. "It's an awfully big chance."

"You asked my advice, and I gave it to you."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, I know but . . ."

I went on. "I've got a couple of other ideas if you're interested."

"Of course."

"You'll have to do as I tell you."

"You mean ignore him, not give him the money?"

"Yes."

"I'll listen, but I won't promise anything." He looked again at his watch. "You'll have to make it fast."

"Okay," I said. "The girl was murdered; but when that coloured maid calls in the police, they'll probably put it down as an accident because the watch isn't there any more."

"You're absolutely certain it *was* there? You're positive?"

"Do I look like the kind of guy that would have day-dreams at a time like that? Of course I'm sure it was there. And I'm just as sure it was gone when I looked the next time."

Once again Remington nodded his head almost absently. "You think this man killed her?"

"It looks like it, but I'm not certain."

"But it must have been he, if she *was* actually murdered."

"It was murder, all right. If there was any doubt about it at first, it's gone now. If she really had gotten into the tub with her watch on, it would still be there."

"That's true, of course." Remington paused, then asked, "If he didn't kill her, who did?"

I almost told him about Cullen Gault and his wife but decided against it. I don't know why; it just seemed like a good idea. "I don't know," I said, "but a girl like this

Tucker Calhoun could have a lot of enemies. I doubt if you were the only one they were working the blackmail racket on."

"That's possible, of course, but I think it was this man who was working with her. You said yourself she must have been double-crossing him by hiding the blackmail evidence for her own use."

"He's the number-one candidate all right, but he won't come into it unless it comes out as a murder. That's what I'm driving at. That's why I want you to leave him hanging on the limb."

A perplexed frown crossed Remington's face. "I don't understand."

"I don't think he has the negative. If he could bluff you, he'd keep bleeding you without it; but if you call his bluff, he'll have to look for it again and that's going to take time, especially if it is actually still hidden in the dead girl's apartment. That means he'll hang around until the coast is clear again. He'll be where the police can pick him up if it should prove to be murder and point at him."

Remington snapped his fingers and a pleased look of admiration spread over his face. "You're smart, Drake. I see what you mean now. If he's arrested for murder . . ."

"Your blackmail worries will be over, especially if he's pulled in before he has another chance to look for the negative and prints."

The pleased expression suddenly left his face and was replaced by worried disappointment. "But the watch is gone. The police probably won't suspect that it's mur-

der. You can't go to them and tell them about it without dragging both of us into it and explaining why you were there."

"Even if I could tell them without involving either of us, it wouldn't mean a damned thing. It would simply be my word that she'd been wearing a wrist watch which had been removed after I discovered the body."

"What can we do then?"

"The only thing we *can* do is prove that it was a murder and that this fellow did it."

Remington's face became sceptical. "That would be quite a job, wouldn't it?"

"It won't be easy."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"I can *try* . . . if you want to keep hiring me."

Remington walked slowly over to the window and looked out without seeing anything. He stood there silently, apparently thinking for about ten seconds. Then he glanced at his wrist watch, shrugged his shoulders hopelessly, and turned back facing me. There wasn't any enthusiasm in his voice. "All right, Drake. I've waited too long to pay the blackmail now anyway. It doesn't seem very possible, but I guess it's the only thing to do." He closed his eyes and ran his hand over his face. "God, I hope he *is* bluffing."

I got up from my chair and picked up my hat. "I think he is."

"How do you intend to start?" Remington asked.

I stood there watching him and debating whether or not to tell him about the Gaults. I still decided against it. "I'm going to begin by deduction," I said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to look around and find all the people with possible motives for murdering her, then I'm going to find out what they were doing between eleven-thirty and twelve this morning. If they all have alibis, it'll mean our boy is definitely *it*. Then I'll go to work on him and see what might come out."

Remington nodded approvingly, and I walked to the door. "Good luck," he said.

"I'll keep in touch with you. Just sit tight. If you get any more calls, ignore them." I put out my hand towards the doorknob, and Remington said suddenly,

"Drake!"

I turned and looked across the room at him. His face had drained of all colour. His deep-set eyes were opened wide with fright. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He came across the room fast and took hold of my arm. His voice was low and excited. "Drake, you don't suppose . . . I mean I just happened to think . . ." He stopped, fighting for the right word. "Drake, do you think it possible that Peg, my wife, could have learned about the blackmail? They might have contacted her without my knowing it."

"I doubt it," I said. "Why?"

"Because, don't you see? If Peg *did* know about it, if she knew Tucker was behind it . . . she might have gone there this morning and killed her." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "She might be the murderer!"

I looked at him. His eyes were tortured, his face haggard and drawn. Either way it was going to be tough on

him. I decided to tell him the truth. Even that was better than letting him think his wife might be a murderess. "Don't worry," I said, "your wife didn't kill Tucker Calhoun."

"But how do you know? After all, she was . . ."

I shook my head, and he stopped abruptly. "I didn't tell you this morning because I didn't want to worry you, but I saw your wife in the hall downstairs less than two minutes after I talked to the girl on the phone. She couldn't have beaten me to Tucker's apartment and killed her any more than you yourself could have."

"In the hall?"

"Uh huh."

"My God! Do you think she heard . . ."

"I don't know," I said. Remington turned away from me, walked over to a chair, and sat down. He buried his face in his hands. "I'll call you this evening," I said. He didn't answer. I closed the door, went down the hall, and out into the street. As I turned west to walk to the Seventh Avenue subway, a long, low-slung limousine rounded the corner into Tenth from Sixth Avenue and headed toward me. It was Remington's car, and Jova was behind the wheel. The car came on slowly and passed me, stopping in front of the house. If Jova saw me, he didn't show it at all. He was looking straight ahead. The woman in the back seat, however, turned her head and looked directly at me. It was Margaret Tulane. I'd seen her show plenty of emotions on the stage, but I'd never seen her large dark eyes look sadder than they did as they rested on my face.

chapter thirteen

AT Seventh Avenue and Twelfth Street I took the subway to Times Square, shuttled over to Grand Central, and started walking east on Forty-fourth Street. Five minutes later I entered the lobby of the Claymore Apartments. The clock over the desk said ten after two. A little over two hours had passed since I'd first seen Tucker Calhoun's body lying in her bathtub.

Behind the desk, a clerk with shiny black hair talked in low tones to an older, fat, bald-headed man with gimlet eyes and flat feet. The fat man stood on the lobby side, leaning heavily on the desk with spread, fleshy hands. His broad Irish face was sleepy-eyed and sour. He had house dick written all over him. When I walked in, he turned his head lazily in my direction, slid his eyes over me from force of habit, then turned back again to the slick-haired clerk. The clerk didn't look at me at all. The detective's name would be Mac or Joe. He'd get a kick out of slugging drunks and shaking down hustlers; he could be had for a price.

I guessed maybe the price would be too high and walked over to one of the two writing tables in the lobby.

Several sheets of writing paper and a few envelopes waited wearily in a rack at the back of the desks. I sat down, took one of the sheets of paper, and wrote the alphabet on it twice with my fountain pen. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the two men at the desk. Neither of them paid any attention to me. There wasn't anybody else in the lobby. The bar where I'd sat the night before was open, but neither sound nor any sign of activity came from inside. The fat man suddenly nodded his head gravely, turned away from the desk, and waddled off down the hall on the left of the elevators. The desk clerk yawned and scratched his head. Then he sat down and began reading a newspaper. I folded the paper with the alphabet on it, put it in one of the envelopes, and sealed it. On the outside I wrote "Mr. Cullen Gault." Then I got up and walked over to the desk. The clerk heard me coming. He put his paper down, got up grudgingly, and moved to the desk, waiting. He said in what was meant to be a polite voice, "Yes?"

I held the envelope out to him. "Would you mind putting this in Cullen Gault's box?"

He nodded without saying anything, took the envelope and turned to study the dozen rows of pigeon-hole mailboxes that lined the wall behind the desk. His beady eyes ran along them and stopped. He reached up and slipped the envelope in one of the boxes. It was number Four Twenty-one. I put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it. "Thanks," I said through a cloud of smoke. He went back to his newspaper without bothering to answer.

I smiled and walked out of the lobby to the street. About thirty feet up the sidewalk, a narrow alleyway or

alcove opened into the building. I went over to it and looked inside. At the far end there was an open door. Above it were the words "Delivery Entrance." Inside, I could see a counter with two men busily sorting packages behind it. One of them looked up as I walked through the door. I glanced around helplessly. The man watched me silently. On my right a hallway led down to the lobby. It was the other end of the same hall the fat detective had disappeared into a few minutes before. He was nowhere in sight now. Halfway down the hall, a small red lighted sign said "Stairway." I pointed to the hall. "Is that the way to the lobby?" The man nodded his head and went back to sorting packages. I walked down the hall, opened the fire door to the stairs, and climbed up to the fourth floor.

When I reached the landing, I stopped to catch my breath and wipe the sweat from my face. The heat was something you could almost cut with a knife. Thirty seconds later I cautiously tried the door to the corridor. It was unlocked. I pushed it open and stepped into a long, cork-floored hall that ran the length of the building. It was empty. The apartment nearest me said Four-O-One. That meant Four Twenty-one would be down at the other end of the corridor. I moved along past the elevators and found it two doors from the end on the street side of the building. On the wall to the right of the door there was a buzzer button. I pressed it. A raucous, rasping sound split the silence on the other side of the closed door. I waited. Nothing happened. I pressed it again with the same results. Just for luck, I tried the door; it was locked, very efficiently, with a Yale lock.

They're hard to open with a passkey, but it can be done if you have the right type. There were a couple on my ring that might have done the trick.

I stood there debating whether to try it, whether it would be worth the risk. As it turned out, I didn't have to make up my mind. The door of an apartment directly across the hall opened suddenly, and a young, skinny maid with tired eyes and a dull face came out. She looked anæmic and sick. Her shoulders sagged dejectedly, and she moved with weary effort. In one hand she held a bucket with rags in it; the other hand laboriously dragged a heavy vacuum cleaner. She backed into the hall and closed the door with her foot. Then she turned and saw me. The expression on her face remained the same, but she jerked her head questioningly at Gault's apartment door. "Ain't nobody home?" Her voice was a perfect match for the face and figure.

"I guess not," I said, and looked back at the closed door. "That's funny, too, because I had an appointment with Mr. Gault." I glanced at my watch. It was two-thirty-two. The maid dragged herself and equipment across the floor and stopped beside me. She leaned the vacuum cleaner against the wall and set the pail down on the floor. One thin, bony hand wiped itself against her apron, then reached in a pocket, and came out rattling a bunch of keys. "You didn't see him go out, did you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Uh uh, I ain't seen him. She went out early, though; around ten-thirty I guess. I seen her gettin' in the elevator down there." The thin hand

motioned toward the elevators as if I had no idea where they were.

"I see," I said. I continued standing there as if I didn't know quite what to do. She seemed to forget about me. The keys rattled noisily again, and one of them finally found the keyhole of Four Twenty-one. The lock turned and she pushed the door open. A dim, dark, little hallway led into a large one-room apartment straight ahead. The Venetian blinds were drawn tightly. The maid picked up her bucket and moved into the hallway. She moved about three steps, then stopped, and snorted disgustedly through her nose.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She pointed a skinny arm at the room in front of her. "Huh!" she said. "He ain't out." I followed her into the hallway and peered over her shoulder. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, I made out two single in-a-door beds pulled down side by side: the bed nearest the door had been slept in and was empty; a man with curly blond hair lay on his side on the other one. His back was towards us, and he was fully dressed except for a coat and shoes. He lay on top of the covers. That old familiar shiver went to work on my spine, and my breath came out sharply. The maid glanced at me, then looked back at the man on the bed. She shrugged her narrow shoulders and picked up her bucket again. "Drunk!" she said. "It ain't unusual. Well, they can clean up their own dirt." She started for the open door.

I felt the need to say something. The only thing I could think of was, "Wait a minute." The maid stopped in the doorway and looked back. I turned to the man on

the bed and said in a loud voice, "Cullen?" He didn't move. I took two steps towards him and said again, "Cullen?" One of the man's arms jerked suddenly, and he turned over onto his back. It was Gault, all right. His mouth was wide open, but his eyes were closed. One leg slipped foolishly off the bed and hung there. He began snoring loudly. It was the sweetest sound I had ever heard. I felt like laughing and slapping the maid on the back; I felt like singing. The maid didn't seem at all surprised at Gault's sudden movement, but then she hadn't found a body in a bathtub that morning. Maybe she'd never found a body anywhere and never would. Still in her profession you never know; there's a swell chance.

I waved a hand at her. "It's okay. I'll stay with him and see that he gets up."

She looked blankly at me for a second, then turned, and walked into the hall. Over her shoulder she said, "It don't make no difference. I ain't comin' back. They can do their own cleanin'."

"It'll probably break his heart," I said as the door swung shut. I don't think she heard me. Gault moved again on the bed and made a mumbling sound. Then the snoring started once more. I bent over and shook him roughly by the shoulder. The snoring stopped abruptly, and I got a whiff of sour alcohol that nearly knocked me down; but his eyes didn't open. He swallowed noisily, snorted a couple of times and was quiet. I went to the windows and pulled up all the Venetian blinds. Light streamed into the room, making it bright and cheerful but also showing the cheap gaudiness of the furnishings. It wasn't rundown or in really bad repair, just ordinary,

flashy, mass-production stuff that was too old to shine and sparkle any more.

I walked back to the bed and shook Gault again. He muttered incoherently and tried to brush me away with his arm, but I kept on shaking. One of his hands crept up to his face and pawed the forehead. A pained frown creased his features, and he opened his eyes. They focused slowly, bleary and red-veined, without memory, the way a drunk's eyes always do when he wakes up before he's completely sober. I stood beside the bed, waiting. He looked first at the empty bed on his left. Then lifting himself on one elbow, he let his eyes travel slowly around the room in my direction. When they saw me, he sat up faster than a guy with a hangover should. He didn't say anything, just sat there staring at me.

"Remember me?" I asked.

He looked me over slowly. I looked familiar, but I knew he couldn't place me. Finally he said in a hoarse voice that needed clearing, "Sure, you brought me home. I guess I forgot to thank you." He jerked his head in a tight little nod and let his eyes rove off to the hallway.

I laughed, and his head snapped back in my direction. "Uh-uh, I didn't bring you home. I'm the guy who gave you the good advice you didn't take last night." He frowned, trying to remember, but it was wasted effort. His head must have ached, and I figured his stomach felt like the inside of a buttermilk churn. He was sick with a two-quart Scotch hangover, and he didn't remember coming home. He was still a little tight and didn't want me to know any of it. He was a phony who'd try to bluff his way out of an airtight alibi if he didn't know

it was an alibi, and it put him in a bad light. Or *maybe* he was one hell of a lot smarter than I gave him credit for being. I sat down on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. He watched me in suspicious silence. I blew a smoke ring out into the heavy, still, summer air of the room. It spun even and neat several feet, slowed and hung in space, gradually widening but still keeping its shape. Gault's eyes followed it as if fascinated. "On the Washington Roof last night, after Tucker Calhoun left you," I said.

His eyes left the smoke ring and came back to my face. They stayed there for ten or fifteen seconds. Then he said slowly, "Yeah, yeah, I remember you now."

I couldn't tell whether he really did or not. He'd been plenty drunk when I talked to him on the roof. "But you didn't take my advice, did you?"

He got up from the bed with effort and fumbled in his pocket without success for a cigarette. He was stalling, catching flies. He didn't know what I was talking about. "I don't like advice," he mumbled. I held out my pack of cigarettes, and he took one. I struck a match and held it for him. He inhaled deeply, made a face, and blew out smoke. He didn't really want the cigarette. It was just something to do. It didn't taste good at all, not with *that* hangover. He probably wasn't a before-breakfast smoker anyway.

Gault swayed slightly on his feet, leaning forward a little with his shoulders stooped. His blond face needed shaving, and his shirt-tail hung out of his pants. One hand rubbed his forehead again. The other pressed against the wall for support. He glanced around the

room, being careful not to look at me. "Where's Lil?" he asked finally.

"Your wife?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. The maid said she left about ten-thirty."

"Ten-thirty!" A foolish expression came over his face, and he looked at an electric clock on a table near by. Its hands pointed to two-forty. He stared at it as if he couldn't believe it. Then he sat down on the bed beside me. "My God," he said in a low voice.

"What time did you get home?" I asked.

He shook his head slowly. The whisky flush was draining from his face, and little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He swallowed twice, loud enough for me to hear. "I don't know."

"You don't remember anything?"

"A guy brought me to the door. I do remember that, at least I think I do." He stood up again. "My God, I feel awful. Excuse me." He swayed away from the bed, almost ran down the narrow hallway, and opened a door. A light snapped on inside, and I heard a harsh retching sound. I got up and walked to the window. The retching sound continued. It almost hurt me to listen.

Across the street there was another apartment building. Through one of the windows directly opposite, I could see a girl painting something on an easel. She held a cigarette loosely in her lips, and she wasn't wearing anything but a pair of panties and a brassière. As I watched, she turned her head and saw me standing in the window. I smiled and waved at her. She waved back

gaily and returned to her painting. The retching in the bathroom slowed to a coughing gasp, like the end of a donkey's braying. Then there was silence broken in a second or two by water running from the bathroom faucet. I turned back into the room, and the water stopped.

Gault appeared in the hallway, looking paler but walking steadier. He came into the living room and sank down in one of the chairs. "God," he said, "never again."

I ground out my cigarette in an ash tray. "What you need is some hot coffee."

He nodded apathetically. "Who are you anyway, and what are you doing here?"

"Your wife hired me yesterday to get evidence for a divorce."

He nodded again as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He still felt awful, but his brain was beginning to work. He'd still feel awful at eight that night, then he'd begin feeling normal . . . if he laid off the booze all day. He didn't look like an alcoholic; they don't have hangovers, they just keep on drinking. Gault said slowly, "Why did you come here?"

"Maybe you really don't remember it, but last night I talked to you up on the Washington Roof."

"I remember . . . vaguely."

"You made some pretty strong statements about Tucker Calhoun."

"I love her."

"Uh huh. You told me that." I paused and watched his face. "You also told me something else."

He raised his eyes questioningly. "What?" His voice was nervous and uncertain.

"You said that if you couldn't have her nobody else could either. You said you'd kill her first."

He dropped his eyes and waved one hand disparagingly. "Oh, that!"

"You can't have her, Gault."

His head came up fast, and his face was belligerent. "Why not?"

"Because she was murdered this morning between eleven-thirty and ten minutes to twelve."

Gault's face went white. He sucked his breath in sharply and rose half out of the chair. He stared at me and started to say something. It never got out. A key turned noisily, and the apartment door opened. We both looked in that direction. Mrs. Gault's figure was framed in the doorway.

chapter fourteen

SHE came a step into the hall, saw me, and stopped. "You," she said, "what are you . . ."

I said pleasantly, "Hello, Mrs. Gault." Her husband rose to his feet. He wasn't looking at his wife. His eyes were on me, tortured and frightened. Mrs. Gault came quickly into the apartment proper. She glanced at her husband, saw the expression on his face, and then turned to me.

"You shouldn't have come here, Mr. Drake. I told you last night . . ."

"That's why I'm here," I said, "because of what happened last night."

She looked helplessly at Gault. He still didn't seem to see her. "What's wrong?" she asked in a weak voice.

"Plenty," I said. "Maybe you'd better sit down. We're going to have a little talk."

Gault took a step towards me. He wet his lips with his tongue. "You said she was dead." His voice was hoarse and hollow. It sounded even worse than his face looked.

I nodded my head. "That's right."

Mrs. Gault turned toward her husband, and her eyes filled with fright. "Who? Who's dead?"

Gault pushed past her and grabbed one of my coat lapels. His voice climbed an octave. It was tense and strained, almost hysterical. "Where is she? Where is she?" I reached up, took hold of his thumb, and twisted. The hand left my lapel, and Gault wrenched it free from my grasp. His voice rose to a near scream. "Where is she? Goddammit, where . . ." The palm of my hand exploded against his cheek in a hard slap. His eyes flew open as wide as his mouth. He worked his lips. I slapped him again, this time even harder. His head snapped sideways, and the lips stopped working. He stared at me. Then one hand went up slowly and rubbed the cheek. He didn't make a sound. Without taking his startled eyes off my face, he backed slowly across the room and sat down.

Mrs. Gault turned angrily on me. "Why did you hit him?"

"I don't like hysterics."

Fear replaced some of the anger in her voice. "Why did you come here?"

"I'm coming to that," I said. "Last night you hired me with a phony story and tried to kill a woman named Tucker Calhoun."

Gault started to get up from his chair again. His eyes had shifted from me to his wife. "You mean she . . ."

"Shut up," I said, "and sit down." He sat again. Mrs. Gault still stood in the centre of the floor, watching me anxiously. I turned to her again. "I stopped you, but

you said you were going to kill her anyway. She was murdered this morning."

Mrs. Gault spoke almost in a whisper. "Tucker was murdered? She's dead?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

I told them everything that had occurred except the name of my client and the nature of the blackmail evidence. When I had finished, Mrs. Gault said, "That sounds like Tucker, all right." Gault didn't say anything. He sat like a zombi, staring straight ahead. I wasn't even sure he'd heard my story. I looked at Mrs. Gault's face. It didn't seem to be any paler than usual. It didn't show any sorrow or particular shock, but on the other hand it didn't show pleasure either. She looked exactly as if she'd been expecting Tucker Calhoun's murder for years. She walked slowly to the sofa and sat down. A frown hardened her face, and the tiny crow's feet came into view. I waited for her to speak again. Finally she said, "But if the watch was gone the second time you saw her body, how will the police know it's murder?"

"Because I'm going to try and prove it to them."

"But how?"

"I think I know who killed her."

"This man Estep?"

"Yes."

Gault still said nothing. His wife leaned forward in her chair and asked earnestly, "How can you prove he killed her?"

"It might help a lot if you and your husband have an alibi for the time of the murder."

Gault stood up. "You think one of us killed Tucker?"

I shrugged lightly. "I don't know. You both had swell motives, and you both threatened her last night." I pointed a finger at Mrs. Gault. "You *tried* to kill her last night."

"I wanted to kill her last night," Mrs. Gault said slowly. "And I would have killed her if you hadn't stopped me. She deserved killing. I wanted to kill her this morning and I'm glad she's dead, but I didn't do it."

Gault turned to his wife and looked down at her. "You killed her," he said in a tense, tight voice. "You killed her because you knew I loved her, and she loved me. You killed her, and I'm going to . . ."

I grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, and shoved him down in his chair. "You're a damned fool," I said, and turned back to his wife. "Where were you this morning between eleven and twelve?"

Mrs. Gault smiled. It was a smug little smile, too smug. "I had a job this morning on the radio. I rehearsed from eleven to twelve-thirty. We were on the air from twelve-thirty to twelve-forty-five."

"That's a swell alibi," I said. "I suppose you can prove it?"

"Of course."

I pointed at Gault. "What about him? What time did he get home?"

Mrs. Gault looked at her husband. He dropped his eyes to the floor. Something very much like pity crossed her face. "I'm not sure exactly what time it was, sometime between nine and ten this morning. He was drunk, disgustingly drunk."

"Yeah, I know. He says a man brought him to the door. He doesn't remember who it was."

"It was Mr. MacDonald, the house detective downstairs. He found Cullen sitting on the floor in the hall near the delivery entrance, asleep, so he brought him upstairs."

"You're sure of the time?" I asked.

"Yes. It was after I'd gotten out of bed and had a shower. I had the alarm set for nine." She reached over and picked up the electric clock. "Here, you can still see where it's set." I walked over and looked at it. It was set for nine. "It must have been about nine-thirty when Cullen got here. We put him there on the bed without even undressing him, and he went right to sleep. Then I had breakfast and left to do my radio job at about ten-thirty." She glanced contemptuously at Gault. "I doubt if Cullen could have sobered up, gone to Tucker's apartment, murdered her and arranged things to look like an accident, and then returned here."

"If the drunk business was an *act*, he had plenty of time to do it."

"It wasn't an act," Mrs. Gault said simply.

I remembered the retching and the whisky smell; I remembered how drunk he'd been the night before. "No," I said. "I don't think it was an act. On the other hand if it was and he did go out, one of the elevator boys or the clerk in the lobby would have seen him."

Gault shook his head. "I didn't go out . . . or if I did, I don't remember it." He put his head down in his hands.

I nodded. "If nobody saw him go out, it ought to hold

water." I walked over to where the telephone was and picked it up. "Now we'll check on *your* story."

Mrs. Gault raised her eyebrows. "How?"

"What's the name of the show you were on and who is the director?"

"The show is called *Mildred's Mother Mamie*. The director is Ed Shelby."

"Where would he be now?" I asked.

Mrs. Gault looked at the clock again. It said two-fifty-three. "He'd be at the agency now, I guess."

"What's the agency?"

"Stiller and Brock."

"Do you know the number?"

"No." I reached under the table, took out the phone book, and looked up the number. Then I dialled it and waited. Gault lifted his head from his hands and lit a cigarette. He didn't look at his wife. She stood uncertainly, watching me. In a second or two, the phone was answered by a switchboard girl. I told her whom I wanted and had another wait. Another girl came on, more high-toned, not so practical as the first one. This one said, "Yes?"

"I want to speak to Mr. Shelby."

"Who's calling?" The voice sounded supercilious and condescending.

It annoyed me. "Never mind who's calling. If Shelby's there, put him on. It's important."

"I'm sorry," the voice sing-songed, "but Mr. Shelby only speaks on the phone by appointment. If you'll leave your name, I'll . . ."

I cut in fast. "Listen, I'm not a ham actor looking for

work. I'm a detective. If Shelby wants appointments, he might have one at the police station if you don't put him on and damned fast."

The smug little voice forgot it worked in the radio department of an advertising agency; it said, "Yes, sir," and meant it. It went away, and Mr. Shelby came on fast. Ordinarily his deep voice would have been bored and superior. It would frighten actors and impress snooty stenographers. Now, it was shaky with nervousness. *Police* is a strong word, and even radio directors have guilty consciences. I almost laughed out loud. Shelby said, "Hello?" He wasn't used to putting the question mark on it. It robbed him of his dignity.

"Relax," I said. "We're not pulling you in, not yet anyway. I want some information."

He cleared his throat noisily. "Yes, sir." No GI's ever said it that way, but officers did . . . if they were scared. I grinned. Probably an ex-Captain who'd fought a hell of a war in the Hollywood studios of the Armed Forces Network.

I decided to rob him of some more of his dignity. For the first time that morning I was having a little fun. "Do you direct a radio programme called *Mildred's Mother Mamie*?" Only an idiot could have missed the disparaging sarcasm in my voice.

He missed it completely. The dulcet tones took on their normal self-importance and dropped two notes lower. "Why, yes, I do." He cleared his throat again. His secretary would be standing in the door of his office watching in awe. He'd see her out of the corner of his eye. He'd frown. Later he'd make it a hell of a story.

When the agency started its next "crime doesn't pay" show, he'd probably get the job directing it because of his practical experience in such matters.

"Swell," I said. "Do you know an actress named Lillian Gault?"

There was a pause. He was in a spot. He didn't know whether he ought to know her or not. My voice became impatient. "Well, do you or don't you?"

He said quickly, "Why, yes. I believe I know her."

"You believe you know her? She says she was on your show this morning. Was she?"

The deep voice cleared itself, and the shaky nervousness came back. "Yes, yes, she was."

"Good. What time do you have rehearsal?"

"The call is for eleven. We rehearse from eleven until twelve-thirty. Then we go on the air."

"Was Mrs. Gault there all the time during that period this morning?"

"Yes. We had no break at all this morning. The script was way over, and I had a lot of cutting to do."

I started to say, "I'll bet you did it well," but thought better of it. "This is important," I said. "You're positive she was there all the time? She didn't have a stand-in do part of the rehearsal?"

"Of course, I'm positive. I was there. Besides, I never allow stand-ins or conflicts on my shows."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Shelby," I said. "You've been a big help. If we can ever do you a favour, just drop in at headquarters."

"Not at all, not at all." The self-importance was back with some to spare. "Er, what was the name again?"

"Just ask for Kelly," I said.

"Oh, yes, Kelly, Kelly." His pencil was busy, but his brain wasn't. I started to hang up the receiver, and Shelby's voice came over the wire again, confident and superior. "By the way, Kelly, just what has Mrs. Gault done?"

I put the receiver down with a loud click and turned towards Mrs. Gault. "Okay," I said, "your alibi is airtight. You couldn't have killed Tucker Calhoun no matter how much you wanted to, unless that director is lying, and he didn't strike me as the type who'd lie to help anyone but himself."

"Of course I didn't kill her." She looked at her husband. "And I don't think Cullen did either." She turned back to me. "Maybe it really was an accident after all."

"Not with that watch gone the second time I saw her, it wasn't."

Mrs. Gault frowned. "I don't understand that, about the watch I mean. If this man Estep killed her, when did he take the watch off her arm? You said yourself it was gone when the two of you went in the bathroom. Of course, he could have taken it after hitting you on the head, but you said it was gone before he did that."

"I haven't figured that one out yet, but I will. He might have come back twice, though I admit that doesn't make much sense. Of course, there's always the chance that some third party came in after I left the first time and got out again before Estep and I arrived."

"But even if that *did* happen, why would this other person take the watch if he wasn't the murderer?"

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know unless he has

guessed who the murderer is and is figuring some sort of blackmail angle." I walked over to Gault's chair and stood looking down at him. He still appeared dazed, but the sullenness was slowly coming back into his face. His eyes didn't meet mine. "You're sure you never heard of Luke Estep?" I asked.

"No, I've never heard of him. I don't know anything about him." It may have been my imagination, but I thought he answered a little too quickly.

I put a light sneer in my voice. "He was on pretty friendly terms with the Calhoun girl."

Gault's pale unshaven face reddened slightly. He looked up at me with what he considered were the eyes of a "he man" who has suffered a great blow but who'll carry on in the face of everything. He stood up, holding his shoulders straight, and his chin thrust out. His voice was theatrically hoarse and grim. "Where is she? I must go to her at once." I laughed, and Gault's eyes looked pained. Even his wife smiled. It wasn't a happy smile, just sad and resigned, the way a loving mother smiles at her only, spoiled child.

"You've seen too many Gable movies," I said. Gault's face crimsoned with embarrassment. He clenched his fists and tried to think of something to say. I didn't give him a chance. "Take a tip from me and stay out of this. So far you're in the clear. If you're smart, neither of you will even let on you know she's dead until somebody tells you officially or you read it in the papers." I added as an afterthought, "If it makes the papers."

"Of course," said Mrs. Gault. Gault didn't say anything. He was still standing there with clenched fists and

a red face, trying to think of some way to justify his stagey heroics. Mrs. Gault reached down and picked up her handbag. She opened it and took out a half-used pack of cigarettes. As she started to close the bag, she saw something inside, something she'd evidently forgotten. She drew it out. It was the envelope I'd asked the clerk to put in their mailbox. The seal was still unbroken. She walked over and handed it to Gault. "This was in the box for you," she said.

He took it, tore open the envelope, drew out the folded paper and glanced at it. An expression of little-boy bewilderment came over his face. "What is it?" he asked.

"An old trick to find out somebody's room number in a hotel that doesn't give out numbers indiscriminately." Gault didn't get it. He looked at me, then at the paper. He sat down in his chair again without saying anything.

I turned back to Mrs. Gault. "Last night you told me you'd known Tucker Calhoun for years, at one time intimately."

"Yes, I did."

"A girl like that would very likely have a lot of enemies. Do you know of anybody, anybody else at all, who might have wanted to kill her?"

Mrs. Gault lit her cigarette and frowned thoughtfully. "No," she said slowly, "I can't think of anybody. A lot of people disliked Tucker, but I don't know of any who'd want to kill her."

"You mentioned something about a boy friend she took away from you several years ago and later threw over. You said he took it pretty hard. What about him?"

"He left town, and I never saw him again. He was a sweet kid, one of the nicest boys I ever knew. He really loved Tucker, and she just about broke his heart, I guess. He might have never gotten over it or his love might have turned to hate, but there's one thing I'm certain of: Jim Hockaday would never murder anybody." She paused and watched me a second. Then she leaned forward and asked anxiously, "What's wrong, Mr. Drake?"

I didn't answer her. I was thinking about a wholesome-looking girl with frightened eyes and a wide-brimmed hat, a girl I'd seen on the stairway of Two Twenty-two Gramercy Park, a girl who was in a hurry, and whose name was Josephine Hockaday.

chapter fifteen

A COUPLE of minutes later I left the Gaults alone in their apartment and went down to the lobby of the Claymore. I hadn't told them about the girl I'd seen that morning or the Beekman Hotel bill I still had in my coat pocket. On the way down in the elevator, I asked the operator if he'd seen Cullen Gault go out. He remembered the house detective taking him up, but he hadn't seen Gault leave again. The same slick-haired clerk was busy talking to one of the guests and didn't see me get out of the elevator. I walked over and leaned on the desk, waiting. When he had finished talking, I motioned to him. He recognized me and moved down towards me. He looked back toward the mailboxes. "Mrs. Gault got your message," he said. "She came in just a few minutes ago."

"What about Mr. Gault?" I asked.

"He hasn't come in yet."

"You saw him go out earlier this morning?"

The clerk shook his head. "No, I didn't see him." His eyebrows lifted. "He was out when you were here before, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. I thought maybe he'd come in while I was gone."

"No, and I'm sure I'd have seen him. I've been right here behind the desk. He probably went out before I came on duty."

"What time do you go on duty?"

"I come on at ten in the morning."

I drew a pack of cigarettes from my pocket, took one out, and put it in my mouth. Then I held out the pack to the clerk. "Cigarette?"

"Uh uh, I can't smoke while I'm on duty."

"Too bad," I said. I let my voice drop lower. I became confidential. "Where's the house detective?"

The clerk's eyebrows went up sharply again. He eyed me suspiciously. "MacDonald?"

"I don't know his name. I just want to see him. I think he can help me."

The clerk looked over his shoulder, then around the lobby. Nobody was near. "What's your racket, chum?" he asked in a low, near-sinister voice.

I puffed my cigarette, looked at it, and spoke softly, barely moving my lips. "Process server. This Gault's my baby, but he's tough, cagey. I think the house man can help me."

He shook his head doubtfully. "I don't think he's supposed to mix in things like that."

I winked one eye slowly. "Of course he's not *supposed* to."

The clerk looked at me steadily for several seconds. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said, "he's got a little office down there." He motioned towards the

hall leading to the delivery entrance. "First door on the left."

"Thanks," I said and started to move away.

The clerk leaned across the desk. I stopped. "Any money in it?" he asked.

"In what?"

"Serving those processes."

"Not much, but it's a good filler. I do it in my spare time. You ought to try it sometime."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, it's an idea." I turned and walked down the little hall and stopped in front of the door the clerk had indicated. It was closed. I rapped softly on it. Inside a hoarse, grating voice grunted, "Come in." I opened the door. The bald-headed man I'd seen talking to the clerk earlier sat at a little desk in the cubbyhole room. A half-smoked cigar stuck out of his mouth. He was reading a comic book. A single, unshaded light hung dismally from the ceiling. His thick, flat Irish face had turned away from the book towards the door. The eyes were not quite half-closed; they had about as much expression as a stone wall. "You'll hurt your eyesight reading in that light," I said. He didn't move, didn't say anything. I came into the room and closed the door behind me. The fat man watched me impassively. The tip of his cigar reddened brightly, then dimmed, and smoke swirled from his lips. I took my wallet out of my hip pocket, drew out the Private Investigator's licence, and dropped it on the desk beside the comic book. He took the cigar from his mouth, picked up the licence, and looked at it. He looked at it for about thirty seconds. I tilted my hat back on my head and sat

on the edge of the desk. A tired expression came into the gimlet eyes. They lifted to my face and studied it. The grating voice said, "That bruise behind your ear looks like trouble. We don't like trouble here."

"That's why I came to see you," I said. "If you give the right answers, you can read your comic book in peace."

The big, bald head nodded slowly, seriously. "Okay, shoot."

"A guy named Gault lives in Four Twenty-one." He nodded again, and his eyes closed, then opened slowly as if it were a great effort. "His wife says you found him sitting out there on the floor this morning about nine-thirty. She says you brought him upstairs." MacDonald watched me for nearly ten seconds, then he made up his mind. He nodded again. I went on. "She says he was very, very drunk. Gault himself says he was very, very drunk." I paused, took a last puff on my cigarette, and ground it out in the well-filled ash tray on the desk. "Was he?"

The fat detective nodded his head again slowly. He wasn't a man to waste words. "He was," he said.

"It couldn't have been an act, could it? I mean he couldn't have maybe gotten up about an hour later, sneaked down the stairs and out through the delivery entrance, taken a cab downtown, done some really hard work and split-second thinking for about half an hour, and then come back again, could he?"

MacDonald eyed me coldly for several seconds. Then he took the cigar out of his mouth again. "I was on the force for twenty years until my feet went bad. Since then I've been working hotels. I've seen a lot of drunks

in my time, more than most people, I guess. I've seen all types, everything from smoke-soaked bums to Yale amateurs. There's plenty of variation in between. No, it wasn't an act. I don't think anybody could fool me with a phony drunk act, especially a guy like young Gault."

I leaned down on the desk. "Not even if he was building himself an alibi for murder?"

The fat man put his cigar back in his mouth. He placed both hands carefully on the desk and moulded them into a pyramid. He examined them critically. Then he turned his eyes back on me. "*Nothing* could have waked him for *two* hours; after *three* an earthquake *might* have done the trick; at the end of *four* a naked blonde or a cop might have some luck. Want to try?"

I grinned and got up off the edge of the desk. "I already have," I said.

"The right answers, huh?"

"The right answers."

"No trouble?"

"No trouble at all." I moved towards the door after picking up my licence from his desk. In the doorway I turned and looked back. There still was no expression on his large face. The gimlet eyes were gazing at the open comic book. One big, thick hand raised slowly and motioned in a half-salute.

I closed the door and went back through the lobby to the street. A man was just getting out of a taxi in front of the building. I waited until he had paid the driver, then got in and sat down. Four swell motives and four perfect alibis. Things were looking up. Four down and one to go.

I realized the driver was looking back questioningly at me. "Beekman Hotel," I said. We rolled down the street and turned uptown into First Avenue. The Beekman is only about five or six blocks from the Claymore at the corner of Forty-ninth and First, but I had a feeling time was important. I was right.

A tiny, nervous little man was behind the desk at the Beekman when I walked into the lobby. He was very anxious to please. He leaned his head forward politely and said in a voice your aunt from Ohio would love, "Yes, sir? May I help you?"

"Yes," I said. "Is Miss Josephine Hockaday registered here?"

He trotted quickly over and looked through the registry, running his birdlike fingers swiftly up and down the pages. In a second he raised his head and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, sir. She *was* registered, but she checked out a couple of hours ago."

I became very perplexed. I rapped my fingers nervously on the desk. "Hmm," I said. A helpful, anxious frown stole over the clerk's face. "It must be the same girl. I wonder why she left? Of course, there might have been two of them with the same name." The clerk nodded as if he felt that way about it, too. I snapped my fingers suddenly, leaving the snapped finger out in the air pointed at the clerk. "She *was* registered from Cleveland, Ohio, wasn't she?"

The clerk looked quickly down at his register. A look of relief passed over his features. "Oh, no, sir. Our Miss Hockaday was from Danbury, Connecticut. You must have made a mistake."

"Dammit," I said, "I never have any luck."

The obliging little clerk said, "I'm awfully sorry, sir." I really think he meant it, too. He was that sort of guy. I walked quickly across the lobby, went in a phone booth, and called Grand Central Station. The next train for Danbury was at three forty-five, arriving in Danbury at five-thirty. I hung up the phone and looked at the clock over the desk. It said twenty-eight minutes after three. Seventeen minutes! I left the Beekman fast, got a cab on the corner, and told the driver to beat it to Grand Central Station.

chapter sixteen

WE made it, with five minutes to spare. It gave me plenty of time to buy a ticket before boarding the train; it even gave me enough time to buy an early edition of the *World-Telegram*. I went into the smoking car, lit a cigarette, and started looking through the paper. The dismal tenements of Harlem were flashing past the window by the time I found the story. It was on page eight, jammed in between the continuations of the front page leads. It wasn't considered very important and had just made the edition. The small head said, "Actress Slips in Tub—Dead." It stated briefly how Tucker Calhoun, general understudy in the play *Nightwind*, had been found dead in the bathtub by her coloured maid, Lydia Smith, who lived at Eight Twenty-nine East One Hundred and Eighteenth Street. The girl had obviously slipped on a cake of soap while getting out of the tub, fatally smashing the back of her head in the fall. The police had been called in, but there was no mention of anything other than an accident. If they had any suspicion of murder, they weren't saying so. I wondered. The New York police are far from stupid. It was a swell plant without the

watch, but there just might have been something else off-key, something I'd missed but which the police would find. If so, they might keep quiet about it and start investigating the dead girl's past. It wasn't a past that would look nice under a microscope. I'd been careful about fingerprints but had probably left some; Estep probably had, too. They could trace mine fast enough; I'd been a GI in the Army; Estep wouldn't have been in the Army, but he probably had a record. We'd be a couple of swell suspects. I had no motive; but Remington did, and I was working for him. If they traced me, I'd have to drag my client into it and the whole dirty mess would come out. Remington, of course, had an airtight alibi, but I had none. The Gaults would undoubtedly come into it as would Margaret Tulane, Remington's wife. But they all had perfect alibis. It looked like a toss-up between Estep and me and maybe the girl named Hockaday. I tore the clipping out of the paper, put it in my pocket, and hoped the police really hadn't tagged it as murder yet. It worried me all the way to Danbury.

The train was about fifteen minutes late, and my wrist watch said a quarter to six when I walked into the Danbury station. Only a few people got off the train with me. They all looked like residents who'd been to the city for the day, and either had their cars parked at the station or were being met by somebody. A couple of taxicabs drowsed listlessly near by. They didn't look as if they did much business. There was a phone book hung from a chain beside the booth. I went over and looked up the name Hockaday. There was only one, a Mrs. Ethel Hockaday. I wrote down the address, went out to one

of the waiting taxis, and told the driver to take me there.

We drove up through the business section of town and turned into the broad, tree-shaded peacefulness of Deer-hill Avenue. Four or five blocks farther on the driver swung off into a narrow, quiet side street and stopped halfway down the block. He pointed at a large old-fashioned frame house standing thirty or forty feet back from the sidewalk. "That's it," he said. I told him to wait, got out, and walked slowly up to the roomy, cool-looking veranda. It was the type of house you find only in America, built sometime early in the century, oversized and ugly but at the same time very comfortable. It was an average family home in a small Eastern town, not wealthy and not poor. All the houses looked more or less alike, set fairly close together, yet with enough lawn to take a couple of hours of mowing every Saturday afternoon.

The porch held some comfortable-looking wicker furniture, and a swing creaked gently in the hot August evening breeze. It looked like a swell place to hold hands on a moonlight summer night. The front door stood open, but an outer screen door barred the entrance. I walked over and looked into a cool, dim, quiet hall. A flight of stairs was visible leading up to the second floor. On the left I could see the living room. A closed door on the right led into what was probably the dining room. There wasn't any doorbell, and the knocker was attached to the open front door on the other side of the screen. I rapped sharply on the side of the screen door. From somewhere upstairs a girl's voice called, "Mother, there's somebody at the front door. Can you see who it

is?" It might have been the voice I wanted. I couldn't be sure.

A door at the end of the hall opened, and an older woman's voice said, "Yes, dear." She came into the hall, wiping her hands on an apron and peering towards me through rimless glasses, a woman nearing sixty with a tired, sad, yet very kind face. Once she would have been called slender. Now she was merely thin. Her grey hair was knotted at the back of her head. A wisp of it had straggled loose, falling half over her forehead. As she walked down the hall, she brushed it back into place with her hand. Then she adjusted her glasses, stopped on the other side of the screen, and didn't recognize me. She smiled just the same, politely and as genially as her weary, drawn face would allow. "Good afternoon," she said. Her voice was cheerful, but it, too, was tired.

I took off my hat and held it in my hand. "Mrs. Hockaday?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Hockaday." The smile almost went away as it made room for the slightly questioning frown that creased her forehead. It was an expression you seldom see on a young face; you only see it on a face that has known trouble and come to expect it from a stranger's call. I felt sorry for her. I smiled reassuringly.

"I know this isn't a very good time to call."

"Oh, we haven't started dinner yet." The half-anxious frown receded just a little. She slowly put one hand on the knob of the screen door.

"The fact of the matter is," I said, "I had to come up here to Danbury on business today, and I've only just finished. I used to have a good friend in New York who

came from here. I haven't seen him for several years. His name was Hockaday; and since your name was the only one in the book, I thought perhaps you might . . ."

A happy light swept into the weary eyes, and the smile came back. She interrupted me eagerly. "Jimmy Hockaday?"

I nodded. "Yes, Jim Hockaday."

"I'm his mother." The screen swung open. "Won't you come in, Mr. . . ."

"Drake," I said, "Steve Drake."

Mrs. Hockaday looked thoughtfully at me for a second. She nodded her head ever so slightly. "Drake, Steve Drake. Yes, yes, of course. I'm sure I've heard Jimmy speak of you." She was that sort of woman. The world needs a lot more like her.

I moved into the hall. "Is Jim at home? I mean is he here now?"

The happy light faded out of her eyes, and she wiped her hands nervously on her apron again. "No," she said slowly, "no, Mr. Drake, Jimmy isn't here. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. Jimmy is very ill. He's in the hospital." Her voice fell lower and her sad eyes left my face. "The doctors don't expect him to live."

It jolted me. Somehow I hadn't expected anything like that. For the third time in less than twenty-four hours I felt like an A-Number-One heel. It was getting to be a habit. I coughed nervously and fingered my hat. "I'm sorry," I said. "I had no idea . . . you see, I haven't heard from him in years."

"He was always a poor correspondent, even with *me*." She turned her face back to mine. "But do come in, Mr.

Drake. Any friend of Jimmy's is always welcome here." Her face brightened. "Perhaps you'd like to go to the hospital and see him. Of course, he's changed now. But I'm sure it would do him good to see an old friend. He's so lonely." She watched me anxiously.

"Well, maybe," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

Suddenly from upstairs the girl's voice called, "Who is it, Mother?"

"It's an old friend of Jimmy's, Jo."

"Oh?" The voice sounded eagerly pleased. Quick feminine footsteps echoed in the hall above us and started down the stairs. They had a very familiar ring to them. I hoped she'd be a good actress. It was the same girl I'd seen that morning. She came halfway down the stairs fast before she recognized me. She'd changed her dress and wasn't wearing the wide-brimmed hat now. When she saw me, she didn't stop suddenly. Her serious grey-green eyes opened very wide, and one hand fluttered automatically to her mouth. The other gripped the banister, and she came the rest of the way down the steps slowly and uncertainly. She didn't say anything. By the time she reached the hall, the hand that had gone to her mouth was back where it belonged. Her eyes, however, were still wide open with fright. She kept them glued on my face. Mrs. Hockaday wasn't watching her. Her eyes were on me. She spoke over her shoulder.

"Jo, this is Mr. Drake. He knew Jimmy in New York." She indicated the girl standing behind her. "This is my daughter Josephine, Jimmy's sister, Mr. Drake."

The girl said softly, "How do you do, Mr. Drake."

"I'm glad to know you, Josephine," I said.

Mrs. Hockaday walked towards the living room. "Won't you come in and sit down, Mr. Drake? Maybe you'd like some tea. I'm afraid I can't offer you anything else."

I glanced at the girl, and her eyes met mine squarely. They were pleading and defiant at the same time without being bold or childish. They were nice eyes, the nicest I'd ever seen. I looked back at her mother. "No," I said, "I don't think I'd better stay. It's getting late. I would like to see Jim though, even if it's just for a minute. If you'll just tell me where the hospital is, I'll stop by, that is if you're sure it'll be okay."

"Of course, it'll be all right. He'll be so happy to see you."

The girl said suddenly, "I'll take you to the hospital, Mr. Drake."

Mrs. Hockaday looked at her daughter and nodded. "Certainly. Jo can drive you over in the car."

"I have a taxi outside," I said.

The girl shook her head. "No, I'll take you in our car, Mr. Drake."

"Okay," I said.

She turned and started back through the hall. "I'll get the car from the garage and meet you out front." She went through the door her mother had come out of a few minutes before. I walked over and shook hands with Mrs. Hockaday. Her hand was thin and bony, and it knew what work was. "I'm sorry about Jim," I said.

She nodded tightly and bit her lower lip. She looked away into the living room. "He's really a good boy. If

only his father had lived, things might have been different."

I walked to the screen door and opened it. "Good-bye," I said.

She still stood in the doorway to the living room. One hand held the door jamb as if for support. "Good-bye, Mr. Drake. Thank you for coming to see Jimmy. I'm glad he had such a nice friend."

"Yeah," I said and had to clear my throat. The screen door swung shut behind me. I jammed my hat on my head and went down to where I'd left the cab. The driver was reading a newspaper. I pulled out my wallet to pay him off. He took the money and looked at me curiously.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Get something in your eye?"

"Yeah," I told him, "I got something in my eye." The cab moved off up the street. A 1941 Buick sedan rounded the corner. Jo Hockaday was behind the wheel. I lit a cigarette; and before the car stopped in front of me, I was a very tough guy again . . . I hoped.

chapter seventeen

SHE didn't look at me or say anything. I got in beside her and closed the door. The car moved easily away from the kerb. She handled it well, the way a man would, one of those rare women who really know how to drive. Her legs were long enough not to be ridiculous on the pedals, and her slim brown hands held the wheel with easy confidence. The early evening breeze rustled her brown hair gently, and the faint delicate odour of cologne drifted over to me. I puffed on my cigarette and watched her profile. It might not launch a thousand ships, but it probably wouldn't want to either. It was a face that would be more than satisfied with one, if it were the right one. Her serious eyes watched the street in front of her, and her determined chin was tilted up just a little. She reminded me of a girl I'd gone with in my high school days, a girl who liked to swim and play tennis and who had an older brother she worshipped.

We went three blocks in silence, then turned left into another quiet, tree-shaded little street. Halfway down the block she pulled over to the kerb and stopped. She shut off the ignition and turned in her seat so that she

was facing me. "Give me a cigarette, will you, please?"

"Sure," I said and reached in my pocket for the pack. She took one and I held a match for her. She smoked as well as she drove. Still keeping her eyes on me, she said,

"I don't smoke in front of Mother. She knows that I do it, but she doesn't like to see me." I nodded understandingly. She watched me for a second, but I didn't say anything. Finally she said, "That was nice of you, not to say anything back there."

"Your mother is a very nice person."

"Yes." Her eyes fell to the cigarette in her hand, then lifted suddenly to my face again as a new thought struck her. "You . . . you aren't really a friend of Jimmy's, are you?"

"Of course not."

"I thought not, but I wasn't sure. I thought it *might* have been a coincidence." A perplexed frown wrinkled her forehead. "How did . . . I mean how did you know who . . . where . . ."

"You dropped your hotel bill on the stairs when your purse fell."

"Oh!" Her eyes became uneasy and cautious. I knew what she was thinking, hoping. Maybe I was just a masher, somebody who'd learned her name and address and had come to look her up. The hope died suddenly in her face as she thought of something else. She said in a low voice, "But Jimmy? How did you know about Jimmy?"

I took a last drag on my cigarette and flipped it out to the sidewalk. I watched the thin ribbon of smoke curl up into the gentle August air. Twilight was just begin-

ning to fall. A spaniel trotted up the sidewalk, ears flopping importantly. He glanced at the still-burning cigarette and passed on, going now here and pretending to have very little time to do it in. Without looking at the girl, I said, "Did you kill her?"

"What?" It was barely a whisper, low, intense, startled. I looked back at her. She'd bent forward towards me, an expression of genuine surprise on her face. One hand rested on the seat for support. The other held her forgotten cigarette.

"I said, 'Did you kill her?'"

"Kill her? Kill her?" Her voice was stronger but helpless, almost pitiful.

"You were in the apartment, weren't you? That's where you'd been when I surprised you on the stairs, wasn't it?"

The girl slowly righted her bent body and leaned back against the car door, still keeping her large, frightened eyes on my face. For several seconds she said nothing. Then she slowly shook her head. "But . . . but I thought . . . I thought . . ." It hung there like smoke in an air-tight room.

"You thought what?"

"I . . . I thought she'd had an accident. I thought she'd slipped in the tub. It looked as if she'd slipped in the tub."

I nodded. "It looked like that all right, but she was wearing a wrist watch."

It took her nearly ten seconds to realize the significance of the watch. When she did, she shook her head slowly again. "I didn't see the watch, notice it, I mean.

I . . . I just saw her lying there in the bathtub." A shudder passed over her face. "And . . . and then the doorbell rang. I was terrified. I closed the bathroom door and . . ."

"It was open when you got there?"

"Why, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't have seen her. I wouldn't have thought to look . . ." She paused, and her voice fell lower. "I saw her arm hanging over the tub."

"I was the one ringing the doorbell," I said.

"You're a friend of hers? Miss Calhoun's?"

"No. I didn't even know her."

The girl looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"I'm a private detective. The dead girl was blackmailing a client of mine. I'd gone to her apartment to try and steal the blackmail evidence."

"How awful!" I couldn't tell whether she meant it was awful that I'd do such a thing or whether it was awful that the girl would be a blackmailer.

"Yeah," I said.

The expression of disgust left her face, and she said eagerly, "But you couldn't be sure it was murder just because she was wearing her watch. She *might* have gotten into the tub with it on."

I told her about my second visit to the apartment and how the watch had been missing. I decided not to tell her about Luke Estep and my being knocked out, at least not yet. When I had finished, she looked at me as if I were the dumbest guy in the world. "But if she was murdered, don't you see, it must have been your client that did it. He had a perfect motive." Without identifying

Remington and his wife, I explained why neither of them could have done it. I also told her about the Gaults and their perfect alibis. Finally I told her about Estep and how he'd slugged me. Her eyes went carefully over the bruise behind my ear, and she nodded her head slowly. "Yes," she said, "I noticed the bruise. I wasn't sure, but I didn't remember that you had it when I saw you this morning." She paused and turned her face away. The profile looked nice against the fading sunset. I didn't say anything. Finally she asked, "Why do you think I may have killed her?"

"I don't think you did. I think Estep murdered her because she was double-crossing him in the blackmail racket. I think she had the blackmail proof and had hidden it from him. He was looking for something in her apartment, and I think that's what it was. As far as I know, he doesn't have an alibi; the other four people who might have killed her have ironclad alibis, so they're out; I could have done it, of course, but I didn't. That leaves only you and Estep. You were in the apartment before I found the body, and you had a swell motive."

Surprise filled her eyes. "I had a motive?"

"Of course." I let my voice get just a little hard. "Don't try to bluff out of it. I know the whole story. Mrs. Gault knew your brother when he lived in New York. He liked her until Tucker Calhoun decided she wanted him. So Mrs. Gault lost him, and Tucker threw him over a little later. Mrs. Gault says he took it pretty hard and disappeared from New York."

The look of surprise slowly faded from Miss Hockaday's face. Her voice became almost a whisper, low, in-

tense, and filled with hate. "She did more than throw him over, a lot more, and Jimmy took it harder than you know. I have every reason to hate her, to loathe her, and I do. But I didn't want her dead. More than anybody else in the world I wanted her alive."

"I don't get it," I said. "Why?"

"Why do you think I went to New York? Why do you think I was in her apartment this morning?"

"The District Attorney would probably say it was because you wanted to kill the woman who'd hurt your brother."

She shook her head vigorously. "No, no, that isn't true. Oh, I know it might look like that, but that isn't why I went. I went because I had to see her, talk to her. She didn't answer any of my letters; and I thought if I could only see her myself, I'd make her understand how important it was that she come, that it was our only hope of saving Jimmy."

"You wanted Tucker Calhoun to come here and see your brother?"

"Yes. He loves her more than anything in the world. It's pitiful. It's all he thinks of and talks about, even after all this time, even after the way she treated him. He begs us to bring her to him. The doctors say it might help if she'd only come and see him, just be nice to him. You see Jimmy is very ill, but worse than that, much worse, is the fact that he doesn't want to get well if he can't have that girl. He simply doesn't care about living any more. You must have heard of similar cases."

I nodded. "What's wrong with Jimmy?"

She was silent for several seconds, then her eyes left

my face and she said in a low voice, "I suppose I could lie to you, but I don't see any point in it. I might as well tell you the truth. Jimmy is a hopeless drug addict. It's ruined his health and his mind. He's been in the hospital now for over a month. He's slowly dying and suffering terribly."

"What drug?" I asked.

"Morphine."

"It's the worst of them all."

"Yes." Her voice was barely audible. "The doctors have given up hope of curing him. They say it's just a matter of time unless he wants to be cured, wants desperately to live. Even now, though, it may be too late."

"Was he wounded during the war?"

"No. Jimmy wasn't even in the service. He was rejected."

"Because of the dope?"

"No. He was classified a 4-F before he got the habit."

"How did he start taking morphine?"

She spoke very slowly, thinking over each word carefully. "I'm not actually certain. He'd never tell us, but I think, I feel sure, she had something to do with it."

"The Calhoun woman?"

"Yes."

I thought that over. I remembered the beautiful nude figure in the bathroom, the gay smile she'd thrown at the band leader, Remington's story, and above everything else the smooth, rounded beauty of her arms, legs, and neck. "She didn't look like an addict to me, certainly not a morphine addict."

"No, I don't think she was, but I'm sure she had something to do with Jimmy's forming the habit."

Something stirred vaguely in the back of my mind and went away, something reminiscent but unrecognizable like the sudden smell of a long forgotten odour which brings back dim memories of your childhood. It only stayed a second, and it didn't make any sense. It just seemed that something should have clicked that didn't. I forgot it and looked at the girl beside me. "You may not think you had a motive to kill her; but what you've just told me gives you a better motive than ever, especially if you're right about Calhoun having something to do with your brother's dope habit."

"But I just told you, I wanted her alive. I wanted her to come here to see Jimmy."

"Suppose she'd refused to come. You said she didn't answer the letters you wrote to her."

She studied my face in the semidarkness for several seconds as the full realization of what I'd said sank in. Her voice trembled slightly when she spoke. "You mean I might have killed her if she had refused?"

"It's a swell motive, much better than the other."

"But . . . but I didn't kill her. I didn't!"

I put another cigarette in my mouth and lit it. The girl watched me in silence. I leaned back against the seat and looked at her. "The police are going to find out eventually that it's murder; and when they do, they're going to start digging. They'll find out about the Gaults, about Estep, and maybe about my client. They'll also find out about your brother and that will lead them to you. I've already told you the Gaults and my client have alibis,

perfect, air-tight alibis. Your motive will look a lot better than Estep's." I paused and drew on my cigarette. Miss Hockaday didn't say anything. I went on. "You'd better start at the beginning and tell me all about it, how you happened to go to New York, what you were doing in the apartment this morning, how you got in, everything." I stopped talking and waited. She nodded her head slowly but didn't say anything. "I don't think you killed her, but I'm not the police. I'm just a guy who thinks you're a pretty nice girl with a fine mother and a sick brother. Maybe I can help you. I don't know. You're in a spot, a hell of a bad spot."

"Yes, I know," she said softly. Her eyes came up to mine. They weren't so frightened now. "Thank you for offering to help me."

"Forget it," I said, "and give me the story, all of it. Don't leave out anything. If I'm going to help you and my client, I've got to pin the murder on Estep. To do that I've got to have the truth."

Miss Hockaday nodded again and started talking in a low monotone. "Jimmy first went to New York during the early part of the war. As I've already told you, he was classified as 4-F because of a punctured ear drum. He got a good job working for the government in the Office of War Information. I guess it was sometime in '42. Anyway he seemed to get along fine, and everything went well with him until about '44. Although Jimmy wasn't in the Radio Department of the OWI, he met quite a few theatrical and radio people while he was there. You know they did a lot of broadcasting from New York?"

"I know," I said. "I suppose that's where he met Lillian Gault."

"I guess so although I never heard him mention that name. He used to come home on week-ends sometimes, but he hardly ever wrote us; and when he was here, he didn't talk much about his life there except to say he liked it and had met some very interesting people through the Radio Department of OWI. And then one day he called us long distance and told Mother he'd met the most wonderful girl in the world and was going to marry her. We were very happy for him and asked who the girl was. He said her name was Tucker Calhoun. He promised to bring her up here so we could meet her, but he never did."

"You'd never met Tucker Calhoun at all?"

"No. In fact, I'd never seen her before this morning."

"How did you know the dead girl *was* Tucker Calhoun then?"

"Jimmy had several pictures of her."

"I see," I said. "Go on."

"Once we thought he was going to bring her home. He said he was bringing her. It was on a Saturday. Mother was delighted and cooked a big meal, had everything ready. You know?"

"I know."

"But he arrived alone. We hadn't seen him for several months, and he looked terrible. He'd lost a lot of weight, and he seemed strained and jumpy. Of course, we didn't know it at the time, but he'd started taking dope. He made some sort of lame excuse about why Tucker hadn't come with him and left early the next

morning for New York." She paused for a second and looked out at the street. It was getting dark now, and a street light on the corner had just come on. "That was nearly three years ago. We didn't see Jimmy again until just a little over a month ago. About a week after he left, we received a letter saying his engagement was all off. There was no explanation, but we could tell he was heartbroken. He said he'd quit his job and was going out to the West Coast to look for work. Later we discovered he'd been fired from his OWI job for negligence. I suppose it was really the dope that caused it." I nodded and she continued. "We didn't hear from him very much while he was away on the coast. I don't even know what he did out there. And then one day about a month and a half ago he came home unexpectedly. He was sick and broke. We took him to the hospital and found out about the morphine." Jo Hockaday paused again and ran a hand over her forehead, closing her eyes as she did so. "Poor Mother, it nearly killed her. For a while he was delirious, raving and shouting about Tucker. At first he cursed her terribly, saying she'd caused his trouble and ruined his life. That's why I'm certain she was in some way instrumental in starting him on the dope."

"That's not necessarily so," I said. "He might have meant that because she threw him over he went to hell; in fact, that may have been why he started taking the stuff in the first place."

"No, I don't think so. I'm sure he was taking it before she walked out on him. After a while he began moaning that he still loved her, saying he couldn't live without her, and didn't even want to try. He'd beg the doctors

to kill him, put him out of his misery. It . . . it was awful."

"That may have been because he'd been taken off the morphine. They go through the tortures of hell, you know."

"But they didn't stop completely. They couldn't. He was too far gone. He had to have it. Of course, they're gradually reducing it."

I nodded. "He can be cured eventually if he has the guts to go through with it."

"But that's just it. He doesn't have the guts or the will or whatever you want to call it. He just doesn't care about living any more. They have to watch him all the time for fear he'll try to kill himself." Her voice fell lower. "Sometimes I almost wish they'd let him do it. He . . . he suffers so much."

"Don't talk like a sap," I said. "When did you get this idea of trying to have Tucker Calhoun come up here?"

"About two weeks ago. Actually it was the doctor who suggested it. He said Jimmy was so obsessed with her that it was probably the only thing that might save him. The doctor asked me to write to her to come here and tell Jimmy that she still loved him."

"You mean kid him?"

"Yes. It wouldn't have been much for her to do. She wouldn't have had to mean it or stick to it. We only wanted her to pretend for a while, only until Jimmy was strong enough, well enough to face the truth and take it like a man."

"But she wouldn't do it?"

"She didn't even answer my letter."

"How did you find her address?"

"I looked in a Manhattan telephone directory. She's listed there. She'd moved, of course, since Jimmy knew her. I know she must have received the letters because they never were returned."

"You wrote her more than one letter?"

"Yes. I wrote three altogether. After the first one, I simply wrote and begged her just to come and see Jimmy. I told her she wouldn't need to pretend about loving him or anything else. I just wanted her to come and see him. She didn't answer those letters either. Jimmy got worse and worse. The doctor said he was going to die if he didn't see Tucker. Two days ago I decided to go to New York and try and talk her into coming. I thought perhaps she didn't realize how ill Jimmy is. You know yourself it sounds ridiculous that a person can die because of something like that."

"It isn't so ridiculous. There have been a lot of cases where the will to live would have saved a person's life."

"Anyway I went to New York two days ago and registered at the Beekman. The first day I tried and tried to get her on the phone, but she was out. The next day I finally managed to talk to her. She laughed at me and even pretended she didn't remember who Jimmy was. She was rude and nasty and hung up on me. That was yesterday afternoon late. In the evening I went to her apartment, but nobody answered the buzzer when I rang."

"She worked at night. She was general understudy in the play *Nightwind*." I told her about the night before, how I'd been hired by Mrs. Gault and why.

"I realized that she was probably out last night," Miss Hockaday said when I'd finished. "So this morning I went to her apartment again. I got there at about a quarter to twelve. I thought surely she'd be home then; and I was determined to talk to her, to plead with her, and if she still refused to tell her just what she had done. I was desperate. When I received no answer to my ring, I thought she was simply not answering her door. I decided to go straight to her apartment door and stay there until she let me in. I got into the apartment house by ringing another buzzer and then saying I'd made a mistake."

"You're smart," I said, "that's how I got in, too."

She glanced quickly at me, and I got the feeling she thought I was kidding her. "I thought detectives used passkeys."

"Passkeys are greatly overrated. You don't need them very often. What happened after you got upstairs?"

"I got the number of her apartment from her mailbox. When I got to the door of 2B, I saw that it wasn't completely closed."

"You mean it was actually standing open or was simply unlocked?"

"It wasn't really standing open. The door was closed, but it hadn't been pulled completely to, if you know what I mean. It was resting against the latch as if someone had left in a hurry and hadn't slammed the door."

"Did you knock?" I asked.

"Yes, several times. Nothing happened so I opened the door and went in. I thought perhaps she'd stepped out for a few minutes. That was because of the way the

door was, I guess. I decided to wait in the apartment for her. When I got inside, I saw the bathroom door standing wide open. The light was on, and an arm was hanging over the tub. I went in and saw her lying there. At first I thought she'd fainted, and then I realized that she was dead. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. It didn't occur to me that she'd been murdered. I saw the soap and the way she was lying and thought she'd slipped and hit her head. I . . . I guess I wasn't thinking clearly at all. I didn't want to be found there. Just then the door buzzer rang. I closed the bathroom door, why I don't know, probably just a reflex; anyway I remember closing it. Then I ran to the front door of the apartment and went out into the hall, closing the door behind me. The buzzer rang a couple of more times, and I waited there in the hall. In a second or two somebody else's buzzer rang upstairs, and a woman opened the door and called down. A man's voice from downstairs said something about a laundry."

"That was me again," I said.

"Oh! Then . . . then that's why you were standing there in the hall."

"Uh huh."

"I heard the door slam downstairs, then the woman upstairs closed her door. I thought, of course, that you'd gone out so I came down the stairs. You know the rest."

"You went straight to the Beekman and checked out?"

"Yes. Then I came back to Danbury. I got home only a little after three." She stopped and looked hopefully at me. I could just make out her face in the dusk. She put one hand on my arm and said pleadingly, "You be-

lieve me, don't you? You've got to believe me. It's the truth. I swear it is. I didn't kill her."

I sat there looking at her. She was the sort of girl who grows on a man. Already I'd decided she was beautiful. I could still smell the faint, delicate odour of her cologne. Her hand on my arm felt warm and alive and urgent. She was quite a girl. I wished I had a sister like her. I patted her hand with my own. "I believe you, Jo, but the police might not."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to New York and prove that Luke Estep murdered her."

The hand on my arm tightened suddenly. "But suppose they haven't found her body yet."

I took the newspaper clipping from my pocket, turned on the dashboard light and handed it to her. She read it carefully and then said, "So the maid found her. How horrible to come in unsuspecting like that and find your mistress dead!"

Something clicked suddenly in the back of my brain, something that should have clicked long before. I jerked around, and Jo's hand came away from my arm. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing except I'm beginning to wonder what I've been using for a brain all these years."

"I don't understand."

"Listen," I said, "when is the next train back to New York?"

"Not until nine-thirty. Why?"

"Because I've got to get back there fast."

She looked doubtful. "I suppose I could drive you. I'll have to call Mother, though, and tell her."

"Swell, let's go."

She started the motor and threw the car in gear. We moved away from the kerb. "Why did you suddenly decide that you had to get back to New York so fast?"

"Because I just realized something that I should have realized when I left Tucker Calhoun's apartment the last time."

"What?"

"I found the door unlocked and I left it that way. I got out just before the maid came up the stairs. I watched her enter the apartment, but she didn't see me. I was standing in the shadows on the stairs that lead to the third floor. She didn't try to unlock the door of Tucker's apartment with a key. She just reached out and turned the knob."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you see? If she thought the apartment was empty, that Tucker was out, she'd naturally think it was locked. Estep did when he came in. But this maid didn't even pull out a key. And that can only mean one thing. She'd been in the apartment earlier and knew that the door was unlocked."

chapter eighteen

IT wasn't quite seven-thirty when we started back to New York. Jo knew the road well, and there wasn't much traffic. We made good time, and neither of us said a word until we hit South Norwalk. As we swung out of the narrow, winding, back-country road onto the Merritt Parkway, Jo seemed to relax a little. She eased back in her seat and pushed the accelerator down farther. The speedometer crept up to sixty, then sixty-five, and finally seventy. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw me watching it. "Don't worry," she said. "The speed limit is forty-five and they mean it, but I know where the highway patrol usually hangs out. They won't stop us." I nodded without saying anything. Two miles flashed by before she spoke again. This time her eyes left the road for a second, and she glanced at me. "If the maid killed her, what would her reason be?"

I looked at her in surprise. "I don't think the maid killed her."

"But you said she'd been there earlier, that she must have been if she knew the door was unlocked."

"Sure," I said, "but that doesn't necessarily mean the maid killed her."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not sure that I do either, but I've got a good idea."

"What?"

"Look at it this way. *You* came in first and found the body. That was about a quarter to twelve. The murderer had undoubtedly just left. We know that Tucker was alive at eleven-thirty because I talked to her on the phone. I came in right after you left, say around ten to twelve. I went out of the apartment and walked to the nearest drugstore where I telephoned my client and told him about the dead girl. Then I went back to Tucker's apartment again. I was gone about twenty minutes. When I left, I'm certain I closed the outside door completely; but when I returned, it was leaning on the latch the same as Tucker's door had been when you first got there. Of course, that meant that somebody had either come in or gone out of the apartment house since I'd been there. It could have been one of the other occupants of the house, but the watch was gone when I looked at the body the second time. I think the person who left the downstairs door ajar is the one who took the watch off the dead girl's arm."

"The murderer came back?"

"Maybe, but I've got a hunch the maid came in right after I left the first time, found the body, and saw the watch."

"You think the maid took the watch?"

"Why not? She undoubtedly knew Tucker pretty well. Maids generally know their mistresses almost better

than anybody else. She probably knew Tucker would never take a bath with the watch on and guessed it was murder. She also undoubtedly knew Estep and realized that he must be the murderer. So she took off the watch, hoping to help Estep get away with his plans, and thereby putting herself in a swell spot to blackmail him. Maybe she didn't even look at it as blackmail; maybe she simply thought he'd appreciate what she'd done and give her money in gratitude."

Jo's foot eased up on the accelerator, and the car slowed down a little. She peered ahead intently at a small crossroad, evidently looking for the highway patrol. It was there, sitting silently back in the shadows like a crouching spider waiting for a fly to come along. We slowed even more and rolled respectably past the intersection. Jo turned towards me and said, "But if the maid did do that, if she did take the watch, why did she leave the apartment again? Why did she wait to report the body?"

"I don't know unless she wanted time to think it over, or maybe she wanted to contact Estep and feel him out before she did anything. Maybe she knew where Estep lived and went there to see him. I think that's what probably happened. But Estep wasn't there. He was already on his way back to Tucker's apartment."

"You think he remembered about the watch?"

"No. I think he was coming back to look again for the blackmail evidence. But I think he *did* remember the watch after he got in the apartment. He was going through the desk drawers, and all of a sudden he stopped and went quickly into the bathroom. That was when I

showed myself. When he saw that the watch was gone, he realized somebody else had been there. Maybe he even guessed it was the maid. Anyway he slugged me and beat it out of the apartment. In the meantime the maid probably had given up looking for him and had decided to come back and officially discover the body. She was pretty smart about it, too."

"What do you mean?"

"She rang the downstairs bell a couple of times just to make sure nobody else had come in and found the girl. When she realized the coast was clear, she opened the downstairs door and came up. She naturally didn't know I was there. I heard her ringing downstairs and got out of the apartment and halfway up the stairs to the third floor before she came up. I'm sure she didn't see me. She went straight in without even bothering to take out her key because she knew she'd left the door unlocked. She probably reported the girl's death to somebody else in one of the other apartments, and they in turn called a doctor or the police."

Jo nodded her head, and the car began picking up speed again. "That sounds plausible," she said.

"There are holes in it, several of them, but most of it makes sense. I don't think it's far from the truth."

"You're going to see this maid?" Jo asked.

"Yes. The papers gave her name as Lydia Smith. They also gave her address."

"Yes, I saw that."

"We'll head there first," I told her.

She nodded. "You don't know where this man Estep lives?"

"No, but I've got a hunch I can find him."

"How?"

"I think Gault knows more about him than he has admitted. Also something you said a little while ago gave me an idea."

"What?"

"I'll tell you after I talk to Lydia Smith," I said.

We didn't say much after that. Jo kept the car as near seventy as possible. There wasn't much intown traffic at that time of the evening, and we didn't pass any more highway police. My wrist watch said ten to nine when we sighted the necklace-like lights of the George Washington Bridge. Five minutes later we swung east off the Parkway and headed across town zigzagging down towards Harlem.

It took us another fifteen minutes to reach Lenox Avenue and One Hundred and Eighteenth Street. Jo swung the car east into One Hundred and Eighteenth, and we rolled along slowly, trying to see the numbers. It was a typical Harlem side street, narrow, dirty, and crowded with Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, and Negroes. Dingy tenements lined both sides of the street. Screaming kids played stickball, completely oblivious to the passing cars; men and women leaned on windowsills, talking or looking dejectedly down at the ugliness around them. Some of the men wore only undershirts, and some of the women fanned themselves in an effort to escape the stifling August heat. The luckier ones had fire escapes to sit on. The smell of stale, cheap cooking floated out of open windows and hung greasily over the street, soiling the still night air.

Three blocks slid slowly past, and the numbers became seven hundred. We went another block, and the number Eight-O-Two showed on the first building on the right side of the street. Halfway up the block on the other side, a crowd of people overflowed from the sidewalk into the street. They seemed to be interested in one of the tenements. Their heads were turned up toward the building, and they were strangely quiet. Those in the back stood on tiptoe and strained their necks to see. We rolled a few feet nearer, and the green body of a police prowler appeared through the crowd. I put my hand on Jo's arm. "Pull over and stop." She swung into the kerb, and the Buick came to a halt.

"What is it?" Jo asked.

I opened the door of the car and got out. "I don't know," I said. "Wait here." She nodded with her eyes still on the crowd. I walked up the sidewalk and stopped across the street from the group of people. The front door of the tenement that seemed to hold the crowd's interest suddenly opened, and the figure of a uniformed patrolman appeared. Light from the hallway spilled out onto the worn stoop, showing plainly the number of the building. It was number Eight Twenty-nine. The whining wail of a siren sounded in the distance, coming closer fast. The patrolman stopped on the stoop and looked up toward Lenox Avenue. I followed his gaze and saw the red headlights of an ambulance heading toward us. It came up with the siren dying. The patrolman walked down the steps and began pushing the crowd back. They milled around, and the ambulance pulled slowly up beside the prowler car and stopped. The door opened, and

the driver and another attendant got out. Since the war, they don't carry interns any more; the attendants are trained to do emergency work. They walked over to the patrolman and he said something to them, motioning up towards the tenement house. One of them nodded and put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. Then they both began helping the cop push the crowd back. They got them off the sidewalk and decided to let it go at that.

Another car rounded the corner and stopped behind the ambulance. It was a dark sedan with a chauffeur at the wheel. Four men got out and walked over to the patrolman. I recognized the short, squat figure of Dr. Eugene Talbot, Chief Medical Examiner of New York, and the lean, tall figure of Tom Gabeau, assistant to the District Attorney in charge of Homicide. They stopped and said something to the patrolman. He pointed inside and nodded. They went in through the door and disappeared. Two more cars came into the street and stopped near by. Eight or nine men got out. Some of them were camera and fingerprint boys. The rest were police reporters. The policeman waved the department men inside, but the reporters weren't allowed in. It didn't seem to bother them any. They lounged together several yards away from the fringe of the crowd.

I crossed the street, skirted the crowd, and looked the reporters over. I recognized a couple of them, one in particular, a short, dumpy, fat guy named Herby Golder, who worked on one of the tabloids. I moved over beside him and tapped him on the arm. He turned slowly and looked up at me. His round comedian's face was covered with sweat, and he smelled of whisky, not

too much, just enough to add to the heat. Surprise filled his eyes when he recognized me. "What in hell are you doin' up here?" he asked. I took him by the arm and steered him away from the other reporters. When we were about ten yards away, I stopped and said,

"I've got a girl over there in the car." I motioned where.

"Yeah?" said Herby with more interest than he showed in his work.

"I was going to show her the sights up here, but we saw the crowd and stopped." I jerked my head towards the tenement where the excitement was. "What's happened in there?"

He shrugged. "A Negro got razored."

"Dead?"

"Yeah, I guess so." He pulled cigarettes from his pocket and held out the pack to me. I took one and held a match for him. He inhaled and spoke through the smoke. "This damned heat's killin' me."

"A woman?"

"Huh?" He looked at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about.

I motioned towards the tenement. "In there. Was it a woman?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, yeah, it was a dame. We don't know much about it yet. Have to wait for the boys to do their stuff inside."

"Do you know her name?"

"Yeah. Smith. Lydia Smith, I think." He looked suspiciously at me. "Why in hell are *you* so interested, Drake?"

"It's a bigger story than you think, Herby."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh."

"So you got a dame over there in the car, huh?" His voice was sarcastic. He looked quickly back at the other reporters and lowered his voice. "Okay, what goes?"

I motioned for him to follow me and walked over to the nearest street lamp. Across the street I saw Jo watching me from the car. Herby came along behind me. I took the clipping about Tucker Calhoun from my pocket and handed it to him. "Read that," I said.

He read it, looked up at me, and then quickly read it again. A low whistle came from his mouth. He looked at me again and said in a quiet voice, "You mean this Calhoun girl was murdered?"

"What do you think? It looked like an accident. This Lydia Smith was her maid. She found her and reported it. Tonight she gets knocked off. It's the same Lydia Smith because this is her address."

"Yeah." There was plenty of interest in his voice now. He glanced quickly back at the group of reporters again.

"It was only a filler story. If they're on the night shift, they probably haven't even read it."

Herby nodded. "I hadn't read it."

"Even if any of them have, they probably wouldn't remember the maid's name and connect the two." I grinned down at him. "Don't worry about them. They aren't on their toes. That's why they're on night police."

He patted my arm. "I'll remember that one, Baby . . . when I'm on Sunday features."

"You may make it soon if you handle this story right."

"Yeah."

I went on. "*They* haven't connected this killing with the Calhoun girl, but it's a cinch Gabeau has."

"Sure! My God, it was so hot tonight I didn't even think it was funny that Gabeau and Talbot would both come up here for a Harlem killing. What a jerk I am!"

"Yeah," I said.

Herby looked at me sharply. "What do you want for this tip?"

"All the facts on this Lydia Smith killing. Everything you get when they let you in."

"Right."

"Swell," I said. I pointed to the car across the street. "I'll be sitting in the car over there waiting."

Herby nodded. "I want to find a phone and call this in. It'll give us a little beat anyway, just connecting the two killings. If I know Gabeau, he won't spill on it at all, not at first anyway. They like to work under cover."

"So do I."

Herby peered up at me again. I grinned. "Damn you, Drake," he said, "you're still holding out on me. What's your angle in this anyway?"

I patted him on the arm. "Are you on all night?"

"Yeah."

"Get me that stuff as soon as you can, and maybe I'll give you a ring later tonight. If a hunch of mine works out, we may be able to hand Gabeau his murderer all wrapped up with a pink ribbon."

Herby stood there for a second staring at me. Finally he said softly, "No kiddin'?"

"No kiddin'," I said, "but for God's sake keep your mouth shut."

"Don't worry about that." Herby glanced for the third time at the other reporters. They still stood in a group talking and smoking and waiting. One of them yawned as we watched. The cop still stood menacingly in the doorway of the tenement; and the crowd still milled around in the street, gawking and talking in subdued tones. Somewhere in the dingy old building men sprinkled powder on things, took pictures and notes, and did what is always done when one person murders another in New York City. And all the time a coloured maid, who thought she was playing it smart, lay dead on the floor or bed or bathtub or wherever it was she fell. Some smart maid!

Herby turned and walked casually towards a cheap cigar store on the corner. Over his shoulder he called back to me in a loud voice, "See you in a minute, Steve. I want to get a pack of cigarettes down here in this store." I smiled and crossed the street to where Jo Hockaday was waiting in the car.

chapter nineteen

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HERBY stayed in the cigar store about five minutes. When he came out, he walked slowly back and joined the group of reporters. I told Jo what had happened, and we sat there smoking in silence. Finally she said, "You think the maid tried to blackmail the murderer?"

"It looks like it, but the killer didn't want to play ball. Maybe we'll know more about it when Herby gets inside."

Jo spoke softly, almost to herself. "How terrible!"

She sat behind the wheel, leaning forward on it with her elbows. Her eyes were fastened on the ugly tereement across the street. Gabeau appeared suddenly in the doorway and motioned to the reporters. They moved lethargically up the stoop and went inside. The crowd stirred restlessly, and several people walked away as if they were becoming bored. Some of the faces disappeared from near-by windows. A coloured man in the crowd went and spoke to the policeman at the door. The cop listened intently and looked across the street at a small delicatessen store a couple of doors from where our car was parked. Then he nodded, crossed the street and went

into the delicatessen. Heads in the crowd turned after him inquisitively, and a few people followed him. They stood on the sidewalk looking in through the plate-glass windows. In a minute the cop came out with another coloured man. This one was older and wore a dirty white apron. They walked back across the street and disappeared inside the tenement where the maid had been murdered. I turned my eyes back on Jo.

"Why did they take that man inside?" she asked.

"Maybe he's a crank, or maybe he knows something about the killing."

"You mean he might have seen the murderer?"

"Maybe. More likely he *thinks* he did." I paused and drew on my cigarette. "There's one good thing that the maid's murder proves."

"What?" Jo turned towards me.

"That you didn't murder the Calhoun girl."

Her serious eyes opened wider. "You really thought . . . I mean even after I told you I hadn't killed her . . . you still thought I had done it?"

"Not really, but you *didn't* have an alibi and you *had* a motive. In this business, you can't afford to be sentimental. A sweet face and good-looking legs have helped more than one murderess to go free. I wouldn't have believed you were innocent until somebody else had been proved guilty . . . as long as you *didn't* have an alibi."

"Oh!" Jo said softly. There was disappointment in her voice.

"But now you *have* an alibi if my theory is correct."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you see? If the Calhoun woman's murderer

also killed the maid, you couldn't have done it. At least I don't think you could have. You were in Danbury before I got there. That meant you'd have had to leave New York at least an hour or more before I did, even if you'd driven in in your car."

"I didn't drive. I took the train. I left New York this afternoon on the one-thirty for South Norwalk. Mother drove over and met me with the car."

I nodded. "I believe you. Anyway it would be easy enough to prove. So you see you couldn't have killed the maid. Of course, we don't know yet when she was murdered; but it's almost a cinch it wasn't too long ago, probably late this afternoon or early this evening. At any rate I doubt if you could possibly have done it."

"Of course. I hadn't thought about that."

A man appeared in the doorway of the tenement across the street. It was one of the ambulance attendants. He walked through the crowd to the ambulance, pulled out a folding stretcher, and carried it back into the tenement.

"Is that for the body?" Jo asked.

"Uh huh. In hotels and fancier places they use a basket stretcher instead. Up here it doesn't matter so much."

A shiver seemed to pass over her body. "What will they do with her?"

"Take her to the morgue. Later they'll turn the body over to anyone who wants to claim it, relatives and so forth. If nobody turns up, the city will bury her."

"Imagine dying in a place like this . . . dying in that way!"

"Yeah," I said, "I used to think about that during the war."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jo look quickly at me. It was a nice look, the sort of look a man dreams about. It was a look you could get to like and live with.

Men began filing out of the tenement door. The reporters came first. Behind them came the headquarters men, then the two policemen, followed by Dr. Talbot and Tom Gabeau. Talbot was saying something to Gabeau. Gabeau nodded. They went to their car and got in. Herby separated himself from the group and walked towards us. The ambulance attendants came out of the tenement door, carrying the stretcher. A blanket had been thrown over the corpse. They shoved it into the ambulance and closed the door.

"Well?" I asked Herby.

"Can you give me a ride downtown?"

"Sure," I said and introduced him to Jo. He looked her over critically. I couldn't tell what he thought of her, but I didn't think she was exactly his type. He opened the door and got in the back seat.

"Drop me at the paper. I'm not going back with the boys."

"Gabeau didn't spill?" I asked.

"No. Just another Harlem killing. He's a terrific actor. That's one of the reasons he's on Homicide."

"The other boys won't think it's funny, your not going back with them?"

"Them guys? Hell, no. Half of 'em are nearly drunk right now, and the rest don't give a damn anyway." He laughed.

"Okay," I said to Jo, "let's go." She started the car, and we moved away from the kerb. I half turned and

leaned on the back of the front seat. "Give," I said to Herby.

He was lighting a cigarette. He nodded and puffed once. Then he started talking in a crisp, businesslike voice that was entirely different from his normal, lackadaisical manner. "She was stabbed three times, twice in the neck, and once here." He indicated his left breast. "Talbot says it happened sometime after six tonight. He couldn't narrow it any more than that yet, except to say she'd been dead more than an hour when we got there."

"What time was the body found?" I asked.

"About an hour ago. The dead woman lived with her sister in a two-room, cold-water flat. The sister works all day out in Jackson Heights. She came in and found the dead woman lying on the floor half under the bed. They haven't found the murder weapon yet, but Talbot thinks it might have been done with an icepick. They found prints in the place, naturally, but don't know whether they'll mean anything. Talbot doubts that the killer went out with blood on his clothes. According to Gabeau, they haven't the slightest idea of what the motive was. But that's hooey, if *your* theory is right and I'm pretty sure it is. That alone accounts for Gabeau's being there himself. But he's going to play it cosy. From the looks of the wound, Talbot thinks the killer was a man. The fellow who owns a delicatessen across the street came up with an interesting story. About six-thirty this evening a white man came into his store and asked him if he knew a Lydia Smith. The store owner knew her and told this guy where she lived. Gabeau thinks he must have been the murderer."

"What did he look like?"

Herby puffed his cigarette again. "About forty, slender build, six feet maybe, maybe a little under, very swarthy with a black moustache. Dressed in a double-breasted, blue, lightweight suit and wearing a white Panama hat. And he was smoking a cigar." Herby paused and shoved his hat back on his head. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"Any of it tell you anything?"

"Plenty. I know who the man was who stopped in the delicatessen store."

"Who?" Herby's voice was eager and excited.

"A shady character named Luke Estep. He was friendly with the Calhoun woman and was working a blackmail racket with her, maybe a couple of other rackets, too."

"What?"

I glanced at Jo. Her eyes were on the street. We were swinging down through the dark gloom of Central Park. "I'm not sure," I said, "but it might have been dope." Jo's face turned quickly towards me.

"You . . . you think . . ." I shook my head very slightly, and she stopped with her mouth still half-open.

"Dope, huh?" Herby leaned forward towards me. "How do you know all this, Drake?"

"Never mind that," I told him. "I'm giving you a scoop because you helped me, and maybe can help me again later."

"If you're right about this guy Estep, it'll be the sweetest scoop this town has seen in years."

"I'm right about it."

"Hell, even Gabeau can't know about this fellow Estep."

"Not yet, but it won't be long until he drags him in. There are a few others, too, who had swell motives."

"Who?"

I shook my head. "They've all got perfect alibis. I know because I checked."

"You knew all along the Calhoun girl was murdered?"

"Uh huh."

"What you going to do now?" Herby asked.

I looked at my watch. It was just ten P.M. "Where will you be later?"

"With this story, I won't be on the regular shift. I've already cinched that with the phone call about the two killings being connected. I told them I had a source, but I didn't mention your name."

"Good."

"They told me to stick to the source and phone in anything fast."

"Stay near a phone and don't get too drunk. I'll try and call you before morning."

"Okay. Here!" Herby drew a pencil from his pocket and scribbled on the back of an envelope. "That's the number of Tim Costello's Bar over on Third Avenue. It's only a couple of blocks from the paper."

"I know where it is."

Herby handed me the envelope. I folded it and put it in my pocket. "I'll be there waiting."

"I said not to get too drunk."

"Don't worry about me. Tim knows I'm working."

He'll look after me. If I get too gay, he'll cut off the drinks and tell me to stop being a sap."

"Okay," I said.

We came out of the park into Columbus Circle. Jo looked questioningly at me. "Where are we going?"

I looked back at Herby. "You said you wanted to go to the office first?" He nodded. "Drive across Fifty-seventh and turn down on Second Avenue," I told Jo.

Herby got out of the car at Forty-fifth Street and Second Avenue and started walking down to where his office was. The Claymore Apartments were only a couple of blocks away. I waited until Herby was nearly halfway down the block towards Third Avenue and then told Jo to drive on down Second Avenue. When we reached the block where the Claymore is, I told her to turn in. We found a parking space across the street from the apartment house and stopped.

"Is this where you live?" Jo asked uncertainly.

I grinned and patted her arm reassuringly. "No, you're perfectly safe. Wait here in the car—I won't be gone long."

The grey-green eyes flared angrily. "I didn't mean that. I . . ."

"Forget it," I said and got out of the car. I turned back to her. "I didn't mean that about waiting. Thanks for bringing me into town. It's after ten now. If you're going to drive back to Danbury, you'd better get started now."

Her well-shaped jaw tilted belligerently. "I'm not going back."

"Why not?"

"Hell, even Gabeau can't know about this fellow Estep."

"Not yet, but it won't be long until he drags him in. There are a few others, too, who had swell motives."

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Her well-shaped jaw tilted belligerently. "I'm not going back."

"Why not?"

"You're going to try and find the murderer, aren't you?"

"Sure, but it may not be fun. Estep is a tough boy; I've got a hunch he plays rough. Besides, it's too late to get you a hotel room."

"I don't need a hotel room."

"Where will you sleep?"

"I'll sleep in the car if I have to."

I laughed, and her mouth quivered slightly. "You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the couch . . . if I do any sleeping tonight. Estep may be harder to find than I think. All right?"

"Certainly."

I smiled at her. "You wouldn't be afraid?"

"If I'm not afraid of Estep, why should I be afraid of you?" Her jaw looked more determined than ever. It made her resemble a stubborn little girl.

I leaned in the window of the car and kissed her lightly on the lips. It caught her completely by surprise. Her eyes opened wide, and she gave a startled little gasp. I moved back away from the car. "You'd better go on home."

For a second she sat there staring at me. Then in an angry, just-before-tears voice she said, "You're utterly impossible!" Her hand reached for the ignition, and the starter whined. The motor roared into life, and the gears crashed savagely. The Buick swung recklessly out into the street and headed for First Avenue.

As the car passed me, I said, "Good-bye, Jo." There wasn't any answer. She didn't even bother to look back. I waited until she turned uptown on First Avenue and

then walked into the lobby of the Claymore. It wasn't any more crowded than it had been the night before. A different clerk was behind the desk, and the fat house detective was nowhere in sight. I went over and looked in the cocktail lounge. Eight or ten people were inside drinking and talking, but neither of the Gaults was among them. I went into one of the booths marked house phones and told the operator to connect me with apartment Eight Twenty-one. Mrs. Gault answered the phone. "This is Drake again, Mrs. Gault," I said.

"Oh?"

"Don't say anything but *yes* and *no*. Is your husband there?"

"Yes." Her voice was uncertain, suspicious.

"Is he sober?"

"Why . . . why, yes."

"Good. Now listen carefully. The maid who found Tucker Calhoun's body was murdered tonight."

"Oh!" Over the wire I heard her breath come in sharply. Her husband must have asked what was wrong because she said, "Nothing, nothing, Cullen." From the sound of her voice I knew she'd turned her head away from the mouthpiece. She came in close again. "Yes, yes, go on."

"The police know Tucker was murdered by now, and they've connected the two killings. A witness saw Estep in the neighbourhood just before the maid was killed."

"Then he . . ."

I cut in, "*Yes* and *no*." She didn't say anything so I went on.

"The police may not know who he is yet, but they

think he's the killer. So do I. As I told you last night, I think Tucker and Estep were either using or trying to use your husband in some way. I think I know now what it was."

"Yes?"

"I don't think their only racket was blackmail. I've got a hunch it was just a sideline. I think your husband knows more about the Calhoun girl and Estep than he's admitted. I want to talk to him alone. Make up some story about this phone call making it necessary for you to go out a while. Tell him anything you like except the truth. Then come on down here to the lobby. I'll wait for you. Okay?"

There was a pause and then she said, "Yes."

Three minutes later she got out of the elevator and walked over to where I was standing. "He didn't like it much," she said.

"What did you tell him?"

She smiled. "Nothing. He thinks I've got a boy friend."

"And it upset him?"

"Yes, strangely enough."

"It's not so strange. Now that the Calhoun girl is out of the way, you can probably keep him . . . if you still want him."

"I still want him," she said simply.

"By the way, how did he take it after I left this afternoon?"

She thought about it a second. Finally she said, "Much better than I expected; in fact, he didn't even mention it. He had an awful hangover, though."

"But he didn't start to drink again?"

"No, at least not during the afternoon. I think he had a couple of drinks before he came in this evening."

"He's been out?"

Something in the tone of my voice warned her of the importance of what she'd said. "Why, why, yes, Cullen went out."

"What time?"

She studied my face carefully. "Surely you don't think . . ."

"What time did he go out?"

"It must have been about four-thirty. The telephone rang and Cullen answered it. I was in the bathroom and didn't hear what he said. He only talked a few seconds. Then he called through the door and said he had to go out. When I came out of the bathroom, he was gone."

"What time did he come back?"

"I don't know exactly. He was in the apartment when I returned this evening."

"You were out, too?"

"Why, yes, but . . ." She paused and watched me anxiously. "But you *know* neither of us could have killed Tucker. And the same person must have killed the maid."

"I didn't say so."

An expression of fright spread over her face. "But . . . but it stands to reason that Tucker's murderer must have killed the maid, too. The maid must have known who the murderer was."

"Yeah," I said, "that's the way the police are figuring, and so am I."

"So you see, it . . . it couldn't be Cullen or I."

"Where did you go when you left the apartment?"

"I . . . I went to a movie, Loew's Lexington. I didn't want to stay here alone. I got there about five o'clock."

"What time did you get back here?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it must have been about nine tonight. The movie is a double feature, and I stopped to have dinner before I came home. Cullen was sitting in the apartment when I came in."

"He didn't say where he'd been?"

"No, and I didn't ask him." She paused again and watched my face. "You know neither Cullen nor I could be guilty. We both have perfect alibis for Tucker's murder. You said so yourself."

"I said they *look* perfect. But it's just *possible* that the radio director was lying for you, and it's also just *possible* that Cullen wasn't really drunk this morning and did manage somehow to get out of here and back again without being seen by anyone."

"No, no, that isn't true! We were telling the truth, and we do have alibis. The murderer must have been this man Estep. You said he'd been seen near the place where the maid was killed. It must have been he who did it."

"I think you're right," I said, "but I've got to be sure. That's why I want to find him before the police do. Stay down here in the lobby. I'll be back in a minute." Mrs. Gault nodded her head and sat down in one of the lobby chairs. I got in the elevator and rode up to the eighth floor. Gault opened the door when I rang the buzzer. The natural sullenness of his weak face changed to fear

when he saw me. He took a step backwards and said in a scared voice, "What do you want?"

His blond hair was neatly combed to show off the wave to the best advantage, and he'd shaved. He'd also changed his clothes, but he still looked like a guy with a bad hangover. Even though he'd probably had a few drinks, he was soberer than he'd been when I waked him that afternoon. I walked slowly into the apartment and closed the door. Gault backed down the small hallway, keeping his eyes on me. He said again in a weaker voice, "What do you want?"

"You're in trouble, Gault, *bad* trouble." The suspicion in his face changed to fright.

"What do you mean?"

I motioned towards the living room. "In there. We're going to do some more talking."

Gault's mouth opened, and he licked his lips nervously. Then he backed the rest of the way into the large one-room apartment and sat down on the edge of a chair. He kept his hands on the arms of the chair as if he might need the support for sudden flight. His eyes darted around the room like a cornered rat's, but he was enough of a ham to still try a tough act. "Yeah?" he said in typical, hard-boiled fashion. The slight quaver in his voice ruined it.

I walked over and stood in front of him. His eyes followed me, and one of his hands began trembling just a little. He gripped the chair arm tighter to stop it. I let a sneering smile come over my face. "The police are looking for you."

"The police?" His mouth worked jerkily, but no other

sound came out. The blue eyes forgot to be sullen or tough or anything else. They looked like a little boy's eyes, a little boy who has just been told that he's going to reform school for breaking a window with a baseball. I watched him in silence. Finally he said in a completely scared voice, "But you know I couldn't have killed her. You know I've got an alibi."

"I didn't say *why* they were looking for you."

He slipped helplessly back in the chair and stared at me. "What . . . what do you mean?"

"Dope!"

He half opened his mouth, then closed it. He came forward in the chair again, and small beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. His voice cracked like an eighth-grade student's. "Dope?"

"It's against the law to peddle it, Gault." He shook his head weakly. He couldn't think of anything better to do. I knew I'd hit home and moved a step closer to his chair. He drew back, and more sweat appeared on his chalk-like face. "You told me twice you never even heard of Luke Estep. I think differently. You were crazy about the Calhoun girl, but she wasn't the type to give you a tumble because of your curly, golden locks." He was too frightened to let even that annoy him. I went on. "She played you along for another reason, a reason that Estep was interested in. But she couldn't resist teasing Estep, and he began to think that she actually liked you. That made him sore; so last night he told her to drop you. He was also plenty sore at her for another reason. They were blackmailing my client, and she had hidden the blackmail evidence from Estep. But blackmail wasn't

their only racket, and that's where I think *you* fit in. I think they were handling dope, making addicts, and then selling it to them; the filthiest, lowest, most brutal racket in the world. You don't look like an addict; so they must have been using you for another purpose. You probably didn't have enough money to make it worthwhile hooking you, or maybe they were planning on that later."

Gault pulled himself up out of the chair and mopped at his forehead with his hand. His voice was hoarse, low, and pleading. "I didn't know what it was, Drake, I swear I didn't."

"Go on," I said, "let's hear it, the whole story."

"But the cops, you said they . . ."

"Talk, and maybe I can help you. I told you you're in a jam. You are! The Calhoun girl's maid was murdered this evening because she knew who the murderer was. The D.A.'s office has linked the two, and they know now that Tucker Calhoun was murdered. They'll go in deep, and what they'll find won't be pretty. Part of it will be you. So far they think Estep did it and so do I, but *they* don't even know his name yet. They just have his description, and they'll have trouble finding him. I'm going to try and find him first and hand him over all sewed up. If I can do that, the police may never get to you."

"But you said . . ."

"Never mind what I said. It *was* dope, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but I didn't know . . . I mean when she first asked me to deliver the package, I had no idea what it was."

"When did you find it out?"

"I . . . I never was really certain, but I guessed what the stuff was from something Charley said."

"Who's Charley?"

"He's a fellow who runs a little bar over on Eighth Avenue. I took the stuff to him several times from Tucker's apartment."

"He's probably their distributor. Where is this bar?"

Gault's voice became uneasy. "You . . . you won't mention me, I mean tell anybody I told you this?"

"Not if you tell me the truth. I'll do my damndest to keep you out of it, too. I don't know why exactly, except that I think you've got a pretty nice wife who's still sap enough to love you after the way you've acted."

He nodded mechanically.

"Now where is this bar of Charley's and what's his last name?"

"I don't know his last name, but the bar is between Fortieth and Forty-first on Eighth. It's called 'Charley's.'"

"What does Charley look like?"

Gault frowned and thought about it a second. "He's just a guy, about forty-five or fifty years old. He's sort of stocky and tough-looking."

"What colour hair?"

"Brown, I guess. It's about like yours."

"How tall?"

"I'd say about five-eleven. He's not quite as tall as you are."

"Okay. Now what about Estep?"

Gault's face became as serious as it could. "So help me God, I never heard of this fellow Estep. I don't know

anything at all about him." His voice sounded sincere and earnest. I remembered the conversation I'd overheard the night before between Tucker and Estep. I decided Gault might be telling the truth. He was too bad an actor to lie convincingly, especially if he was badly frightened.

"You're sure you never heard her mention anything about him at all?"

"Positive." Gault's eyes left my face and wandered to the floor. "I did suspect that she saw other men, but she always denied it."

"What made you suspect it?"

"Oh, several things. Once I was in her apartment and a man called. When I answered, he rang off. I never told Tucker about it. I was there alone. Another time I found a man's topcoat hanging in her cupboard."

"What did she say about that?"

"Nothing. I didn't mention that either."

"Why not?"

Gault shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't want to make her mad. I . . . I was crazy about her, and I guess I was afraid she'd throw me over if I said anything about it."

"You *are* a jerk," I said, "but you're lucky at that."

"Why?"

I laughed. "They were using you to deliver the dope. Maybe they were afraid the police were onto them and didn't want to chance carrying it themselves. If you'd been caught, you'd have taken the rap, been the scapegoat. How many times did you carry the stuff?"

"I don't remember exactly, four or five times, no more."

"How did it start?"

"I first met her here through Lil. A couple of days later she called me, and I went down to her apartment. I thought she was just on the make. She was terrific, and in about a week I was crazy about her. I'd have done anything she wanted. You know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

"Well, one afternoon about three or four weeks ago when I was getting ready to leave her apartment, she asked me would I mind dropping off a package for her. Naturally, I said sure. She gave me a little package about this big." Gault showed with his hands how big, a parcel about the size of a fountain pen case. "She didn't say what it was. I was to take it to this bar I was telling you about and give it to Charley. I did, and then a couple of days later she asked me to do it again."

"What did this Charley say to you that made you suspect it was dope?"

"I don't remember exactly what it was, just something he said that made me suspicious. I guess he thought I knew all about it. Anyway I asked Tucker what was in the packages. I told her I thought it was dope."

"What did she say?"

"She just laughed and said a little Joy Powder never hurt anybody, and it brought in good money. She wouldn't talk about it any more."

"But you kept on carrying the packages even after you knew what was in them?"

"I was afraid she'd get sore at me if I didn't."

"She never tried to get you to take the stuff?"

Gault shook his head. "No."

"I hope you've told the truth," I said and walked to the door of the apartment. Gault followed me as far as the hallway.

"I have," he said. "I swear to God I have." I opened the door and stepped into the outside hall. "What are you going to do?" Gault asked.

I turned back and looked at him. "I've already told you. I'm going to find Luke Estep."

"How?"

"Maybe Charley can get a message to him."

"A message?"

"Uh huh. I think Estep will want to talk to me when he gets it." Gault came another step towards the door. "What kind of . . ."

I interrupted him. "By the way, Gault, your wife says you got a phone call this afternoon about four-thirty. She says you went out right afterwards."

"Lil told you that? But how . . . when . . ."

"Never mind that. Where did you go?"

"Nowhere—in particular. I just didn't want to stay here. I . . . I was pretty upset about what you'd told me, and I had a hell of a hangover. I just walked around for a while. Finally I went in a bar and had a couple of drinks and ate dinner. Then I came home."

"What about the phone call you got?"

"Phone call? Oh that!" Gault's eyes left my face, and he put his hand on the door to close it. "That phone call was just a wrong number."

chapter twenty

MRS. GAULT was sitting in the lobby, smoking a cigarette when I got out of the elevator. When she saw me, she dropped the cigarette in an ash tray and got up from the chair. I went over to her. "You'd better go upstairs and hold his hand. He's pretty scared."

"What happened?"

"I was right. He'll tell you about it."

"He knew about Estep?"

"Not exactly, but he knew more than he told me this morning. His alibi for this afternoon is no better than yours."

"But we couldn't have done it. We couldn't have murdered Tucker." I turned away from Mrs. Gault and started walking towards the phone booths. Over my shoulder I said, "I'll let you know about that later." I went into a booth and dialled John Remington's unlisted number. Mrs. Gault got into the elevator and the door closed behind her.

The receiver clicked at the other end of the wire, and a man's voice said, "Hello?" It wasn't Remington's but it had a familiar tone.

"Jova?"

"Yeah." He hadn't recognized me.

"This is Steve Drake, the detective your boss hired this morning. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." Jova's voice was bored.

"Is he there?"

"No."

I had the feeling he was about to hang up. "Wait a minute."

"I told you he's not here."

"How about his wife?"

"She's out, too."

"Listen," I said, "I want some information, and I want it straight."

"No kidding." He laughed sarcastically.

I decided to wipe off the sarcasm. "Your boss may be in a jam, a hell of a bad jam. It has police in it. It may help him if you tell me what I want to know."

The bored quality left his voice. "What kind of jam?"

"Never mind that. Where is he now?"

There was a pause. "I don't know."

"What time did he go out?"

"I think it was a little after four this afternoon. He was supposed to meet his wife back here at five-thirty, but he didn't show up."

"When did she leave the house?" I asked.

"At about a quarter to six. They were supposed to go to a cocktail party; but when the boss didn't show up, she decided to go on without him. She figured he'd meet her there."

"Did you drive her to the party?"

"Yeah."

"What about afterwards? Did you pick them up later?"

"No. They had a date for dinner with some friends, I think. Later they were going to the theatre. Miss Tulane said they'd get a taxi home."

"I see," I said slowly.

"You want to leave a message for the boss?"

"Just tell him I was trying to get in touch with him. Tell him I may call him later tonight. Does he go to bed early?"

"No. They're both usually up until one or two. You want to leave a number where he can call you?"

"No. I don't know where I'll be. Just tell him I'll call."

"Okay."

I hung up the phone and went out through the lobby to the street. There weren't any cabs in sight. I had to walk all the way to Forty-second Street and Third Avenue before I found one. I told the driver to take me straight across to Eighth Avenue. As we passed Grand Central Station, I glanced up at the big clock. The hands pointed to twenty-five minutes to eleven.

Ten minutes later I was looking through the grimy, plate-glass window of the bar called Charley's. They weren't doing much business inside. A middle-aged, tough-looking bartender lounged behind the bar, reading a newspaper. A couple of frowzy-looking blondes sat with a man at one of the tables in the rear; his back was to me and he had his hat on. It was pushed far back on his head, and he was talking. His head moved back and forth as he spoke, and he gestured with one of his hands.

He was drunk. The dull-eyed blondes looked as alike as twins, dirty, too fat, and vapid. They weren't drunk but they were bored.

Another man sat at the bar hunched over a drink, staring morosely into a mirror opposite him. He looked drunker than the man at the table. I pushed open the door and walked in. The bartender looked up from his paper, and the man at the table stopped talking for a second and turned his head in my direction expectantly. When he didn't recognize me, he swung back and continued his lecture. The man at the bar didn't move, and the blondes only looked me over from habit in a disinterested manner. I walked over to the bar. The bartender came down and stopped across from me. He put both hands on the bar in front of him and said in a harsh, rasping voice, "Yeah?"

I leaned on the bar and said in a quiet, confidential tone, "Where's Charley?"

He studied my face for about ten seconds, then he said, "Who wants him?"

I glanced at the two blondes and the pimp. They weren't paying any attention to me. I shot a quick look at the man down the bar. He hadn't moved. I leaned farther across the bar and said in a low voice, "I've got a message from Luke Estep."

The bartender didn't move, and the expression on his face remained the same. He studied me some more. Finally he said softly, "Wait here," and moved off towards a closed door at the far end of the bar. He went through the door, closing it after him. I lit a cigarette and leaned on the bar waiting. The man with the two

girls suddenly banged his fist down' on the table and said in a voice loud enough for me to hear, "See what I mean?" One of the blondes got up from the table and brushed at her rumpled skirt. Then she picked up her handbag and said in a voice that sounded dull and flat in spite of its squeaky, babyish quality, "Come on, Georgie." The other blonde yawned and got up. The man pounded the table again and said, "Now you listen to me!"

The blondes walked to the door and went out into the street. The man half rose from his chair and turned his head towards the doorway. The sudden movement made him lose his balance, and he sat down again heavily. A startled expression came over his face, and he forgot the blondes. He ran one dirty hand along his mouth, glowered angrily at me, and went back to his drink. The other man sitting at the bar mumbled something I couldn't understand. I turned and looked at him. He shook his head slowly and put it carefully down on his arms on the bar. His eyes closed, and his hat slid off, knocking over his empty glass. It rolled noisily towards me on its way to the floor. I reached out, caught it, and set it upright on the bar. The man started snoring, and the door at the other end of the bar opened. The tough-looking bartender appeared and motioned for me to follow him. He stood waiting in the open doorway. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Up this way." He started up a flight of dirty steps. I followed him. We came out into a narrow, dark hallway with an open door at one end. Light showed through the door. The bartender motioned to-

wards it. He stood aside, pressing against the wall to let me pass.

"Is Charley in there?" I asked.

"Yeah." One of his arms moved at his side, and the white soiled bartender's apron rustled gently. Something blunt and hard pressed suddenly against my stomach. It really wasn't necessary but he said, "It's loaded."

I took a deep, slow breath, and the gun followed my stomach in. It helped keep my voice steady. "Why the gun?"

His voice fell so low I could barely hear him. "I've already had one message from Luke tonight. He didn't say nothing about another one."

"You're Charley!" I said.

He laughed a low, gurgling chuckle, and the pressure of the gun against my stomach eased a little. "Sure."

"Smart!"

"Uh uh." He shook his head. "I keep the gun up here."

"Put it away. I'm no fly cop."

"Just who the hell are you then, and what's the message gag?"

I said slowly, "Maybe you could call me a future business associate of Luke's."

"I don't get it."

"Put it this way. Luke's looking for something, and the police are looking for him. He's holed up by now and won't be able to move much. I think I can help him out."

The gun pressed in again. "You haven't said enough yet."

"I've got the thing Luke's looking for."

There was a pause, and I could hear his slightly laboured breathing. Finally he said softly, "Not on you?"

It was a hard job, but I managed to laugh.

"What do you think?"

"You're lookin' for Luke?"

"Can you get a message to him?"

"Maybe."

"Swell," I said. "Tell him Steve Drake's got what he's looking for, the stuff he was hunting in the Calhoun girl's apartment this morning. Just tell him I'm the guy he met there. He'll know all about it."

"Drake?"

"Steve Drake."

Fifteen seconds of dark silence passed, and Charley thought it over. Then he said, "Okay. How'll he contact you?"

"Get me a pencil and paper, and I'll give you a phone number. He can reach me there later tonight."

Charley nodded. "Go on downstairs." He put away his gun and followed me down to the bar. The man at the table had gone; the other man still slept peacefully with his head and arms on the bar. Charley didn't pay any attention to him. He went behind the bar and came back with a pencil and paper. I wrote my home phone number on it and pushed it over to him. He looked at it, nodded, and stuck it in his pocket. "I'm not saying I can get it to him, but I'll try." He paused, and his eyes narrowed coldly. "Luke told me why he's hot. He says it's a frame. Maybe you're a cop, and maybe you ain't. I don't think you are, but I ain't saying why I think it. Luke's smart, and he pays his way. He's no killer . . .

unless he's cornered. Take a tip from me, and don't crowd him too far. If it's a plant, it'll be *curtains* for somebody."

"It's not a plant, and I'm not a cop," I said.

He said so softly I could barely hear him, "I hope not . . . for your sake."

chapter twenty-one

THERE was a car parked in front of my Eleventh Street apartment building when I got there twenty minutes later. It was a '41 Buick with Connecticut licence plates, and there was a girl sitting behind the wheel. She was smoking a cigarette. I walked over, leaned on the open window, and said, "This isn't the road to Danbury."

Jo drew on her cigarette and looked blandly at me. "The car is nearly out of gasoline. I didn't think I could make it home, and I came away without any money."

I reached in my hip pocket and drew out my wallet. "I'm sorry. Will ten dollars be enough?"

She shook her head and looked away. "It's too late to drive back tonight. It's nearly midnight. Besides I called Mother and reversed the charges. I told her I was spending the night in town."

I tapped the wallet idly against the car door and thought that over. "I suppose you found my address in the phone book?" Jo nodded. I became very seriously concerned. "I'm afraid it's too late now to get you a hotel room. The room shortage is still pretty acute. Of course, you might be lucky."

Jo shook her head again. "No, I'll sleep here in the car. Don't worry about me."

I laughed and opened the door of the car. "Come on," I said, "my offer of a bed still stands. You'll be perfectly safe. I've got a hunch I'm going to be busy the rest of the night."

She slid out from under the wheel and stood beside me in the street. "Why?"

"I'll tell you all about it when we get upstairs." We went into the building and climbed the stairs to my third-floor, two-room apartment. I unlocked the door and snapped on a lamp in the living room. Jo walked slowly into the centre of the room and surveyed it critically. I stood in the doorway watching her. "It's not much, but a bachelor can't be too particular, especially if he's a private detective."

"I like it. It's homey. For a bachelor it's quite clean and neat, too." She walked to the kitchen and looked inside. "No dirty dishes either. I always thought men left the beds unmade and the dishes in the sink."

I closed the door of the apartment and tossed my hat on a chair. "Don't let it fool you. I'm not as hard up as all that. I've got a maid who comes in for a couple of hours every day to clean."

"Oh." She sat down on the sofa. I took off my lightweight summer coat and started untying my necktie. Jo watched me in silence. The night was even hotter than the day had been, and my shirt was damp with perspiration.

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"Of course not."

I hung the coat and tie over the back of the chair where my hat was and walked towards the kitchen. In the doorway, I turned and looked back at Jo. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes." I went into the kitchen. Jo got up from the sofa and came to the kitchen door. She stood there watching me. While I fixed two Scotch and sodas, I told her about my talk with Charley. She didn't say anything until we were back again in the living room with the drinks. "Do you think he'll call?"

I lit a cigarette, held the match for Jo, and said, "I think so. I'm sure this fellow Charley can get the message to him. If he thinks I found his blackmail evidence and want to make a deal with him, I believe he'll contact me."

"You mean he'll want to buy it from you?"

I laughed. "Of course not, but he'll try to make me think so."

"But why?"

"If my idea is right, he'll want to get hold of his negative and prints by pretending he'll make a deal with me. Then he'll try and cross me up and get them for nothing."

"But you don't actually have the negative and prints."

"No, but Estep doesn't know that. I've got a hunch he didn't find them, and I think he'll believe that I did. I doubt if he even bothered to search me after he sapped me this morning. Later, after he'd left the apartment, it may have occurred to him that I'd found the things before he arrived in the apartment, that I had them in my pocket all the time. At least I hope that's the way he might figure."

"I see." Jo leaned back on the sofa and sipped her drink. A puzzled frown suddenly appeared on her forehead, and her large serious eyes turned back towards me. "Won't that be dangerous, I mean if Estep is going to try and trick you while you're trying to trick him?"

"Maybe, but it's a chance I've got to take. It may take the police days to get him. They may never pull him in. He's got friends and probably money. If I can convince him that I've got the stuff and want to make a deal, maybe he'll agree to meet me. If that happens, maybe I can take him in and hand him over to the police for Tucker's and the maid's murder. If that happens, he can't blackmail my client any more even if I don't *ever* find the blackmail evidence."

"Suppose somebody else found the negative and prints?"

I shrugged. "That's another chance we'll have to take. It isn't likely because I think Tucker hid them pretty well. If somebody else *did* find them eventually, it probably wouldn't occur to them to use them for blackmail. Most people would simply destroy such pictures."

Jo nodded. "That's true, of course. Still I'd be afraid of this man Estep. Aren't you afraid, Steve?"

It was the first time she'd called me by my first name. I looked quickly at her and saw that her face was worried. "Sure," I said, "I'm plenty scared, but there's a lot of money in it for me if I pull it off."

"A lot of money?"

I told her about Remington's offer of ten thousand dollars as well as the money he'd already paid me that morning. When I'd finished, she said, "That *is* a lot of

money. It's more money than I've ever even seen. I guess I don't blame you for taking the chance."

"A man can do a lot with that kind of money."

"Yes. You could build a home, get married, and have children."

"Sure," I said, "you could also take a tramp steamer around the world or live ten years on a beautiful tropical island."

"You'd like to do that?"⁴ Jo asked.

"Why not? I think it might beat this." I indicated the apartment.

"I like this. I think it's nice, and it *could* be much nicer."

I laughed. "The woman's touch?"

The faint trace of a blush spread across Jo's face. She went on hurriedly. "I like New York, too. Sometimes I've thought about quitting my job in Danbury and coming here to look for work."

"You have a job?"

"Yes. I've been working ever since Dad died. One of his best friends was Mr. Rock, the president of the Gas and Electric Company. After Dad's death, he knew things might be difficult for us so he offered me a secretarial job. I took it. When I told him I wanted to come to New York several days ago, he gave me a week off."

I finished my drink and stood up. "Like another one?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks."

I headed for the kitchen. "This Mr. Rock would probably fire you if he knew you were spending the night in a bachelor's apartment."

"I wouldn't mind," she said, and the sudden jangle of

the telephone bell sounded across the room. We both turned and looked at it. It rang again, loud and insistent. I put my empty glass down, walked to the phone, and picked up the receiver just as it started to ring the third time. The jarring bell stopped abruptly, and the room became silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jo watching me. She sat motionless on the sofa with her body bent slightly forward and an apprehensive expression on her face. I spoke quietly into the mouthpiece. "Hello."

"Drake?" A man's low voice came over the wire.

"Yes, this is Drake."

The voice fell even lower. "I got your message."

"Estep?"

"Yeah." There was a pause. I waited. Four . . . five seconds passed. "You've got the stuff and you want to make a deal?"

"That's right."

"How much you want?"

I thought it over. The phone in my hand began feeling wet. It wasn't entirely from the heat. "I'm not greedy," I said finally, "I'm just a guy trying to get along. Two thousand."

Estep said a little too quickly, "Okay."

"You want to come here to my place?"

A low, sneering laugh floated over the wire. "Hell, no."

"Where'll I meet you then?" I asked.

There was another pause. "The police think I killed Tucker and the coloured gal. They're searching the town now for me. I don't know how they tied me in so fast."

"Maybe you left prints in the apartment, and the delicatessen man gave them a swell description. That was a mistake."

"Yeah, it would have been a bad mistake if I'd done the killing, but I didn't. Do I look that crazy?"

"Not particularly but then on the other hand maybe you didn't plan to kill her at first. Maybe you decided that after you found her."

The sneering laugh came over the wire again. "Try again. I think the cops had a stoolie."

"My prints were probably in Tucker's apartment, too. I'm not crazy, either."

Estep said slowly, "Yeah, I thought of that. And they don't like peepers."

"You looked me up?"

"In the classified telephone book."

"Why would I spill about you if I wanted to make a deal?"

"They want me pretty bad, maybe even bad enough to pay more than two grand."

"It's too soon for that."

"Yeah," he said softly. "Maybe."

My voice got tough. "I haven't got all night. Take it or leave it."

The wire was silent for several seconds and then Estep said, "Okay, I'll buy."

"Where'll I meet you?"

"You know where Christopher Street is?"

"Yes. It's not very far from here."

"Good. Go to Christopher and walk west until you're only a block from the West Side highway and the river.

Then turn left on the west side of the street. Halfway down the block, you'll see a little alley that runs between two deserted warehouses. Turn in the alley and walk down until you see a closed door on the left side. It's the office for the warehouse. Knock twice. I'll be inside."

"Alone?"

"Sure. And bring the stuff. I'll have the money."

"In cash?"

"In cash. Make it clean and come alone. If it's a plant, somebody besides me will be sorry."

"It's not a plant," I said. "How soon?"

"What time is it now?"

I glanced down at my wrist watch. "It's a quarter past twelve."

"Can you make it in twenty minutes?"

"Yes."

"Do it." The wires clicked as he hung up.

I put the phone slowly back in its cradle and wiped off my face with my handkerchief. Across the room Jo said, "It worked? You're going?"

I nodded. "Uh huh." My mouth felt dry, and my voice had a hollow sound to it. Jo watched me uneasily. I went into the bedroom, turned on the light, and started rummaging through one of the bureau drawers. Jo came and stood in the open doorway.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

I found the .38 and held it up for her to see. Then I put the gun on the dresser and started strapping on the shoulder holster. Jo watched me in silence. When I had the clip adjusted, I examined the pistol carefully. It was in good shape. I loaded it slowly and put it in the holster.

There was a slim pencil flashlight on the dresser. I picked it up, tested it, and slid it in my pants pocket. Jo came quickly over to me and put her hand on my arm. "Don't do it, Steve, please don't go." She looked up at me pleadingly. Her lips trembled slightly, and she seemed about to cry.

I patted her hand gently and tried to grin. "I'm a very tough guy."

"But he may try to kill you."

"Swell," I said, "that'll give me a good excuse to kill him." I walked away from her and went back in the living room. She followed me. I picked up my necktie and started putting it on, looking in the mirror over the fireplace. Jo stopped behind me. I could see her face in the mirror. She brushed a lock of her hair back with her hand and shook her head. "No, no, Steve, don't talk like that. It sounds like . . . like . . ." She stopped, groping for the right word.

I quit fooling with the tie and turned to face her. "Like a loud laugh at a funeral."

"Yes."

I put both my hands on her shoulders and looked down into her face. "Honey, I've never been so scared in my life. I'm scared silly."

"Then forget it, don't go, please."

I shook my head, turned, and finished tying the tie. "I want that ten thousand dollars."

"Then I'm going with you," Jo said calmly.

"Uh uh. This is my hand, and I'm going to play it alone." I walked across the room to the chair where I'd

hung my coat and put it on. Then I put on my hat, tilting it jauntily. Jo still stood in front of the fireplace.

"Please be careful."

"Don't worry," I said and went to the door of the apartment. Jo didn't move. I opened the door and stopped half in the hall. "Stay here in my apartment. If you don't hear from me in an hour and a half, call the police and tell them the whole story." I told her where the warehouse was.

"You'll telephone me?"

I stepped into the hall and the door started closing behind me. Over my shoulder I said, "As soon as it's over . . . if I can still pick up a telephone."

chapter twenty-two

JUST before I reached the street, I looked at my watch again. It was twenty minutes after twelve. Only five minutes had elapsed since my conversation with Estep. I started toward Seventh Avenue, walking fast. Eleventh Street was dark and deserted. At the corner I passed St. Vincent's Hospital, turned downtown on Seventh, and walked to Sheridan Square where I picked up Christopher Street. The lights of the Square faded out behind me as I headed west towards the river. One, two blocks passed, and the buildings became shabbier. I crossed Hudson Street. Dark, gloomy warehouses and factories began replacing the apartment buildings. Street lights became fewer and dimmer. The traffic noises behind me faded into nothingness. The street was silent except for the sharp clack of my footsteps on the pavement. A faint, damp breeze rustled the still, hot, summer air. It had rain written all over it. Over on the river the low moan of a steamer whistle sounded. The distant, faint rumble of thunder answered contemptuously. Several blocks ahead of me I could see the lights of the Christopher Street

Ferry. I slowed down, hugging the shadows, and began wishing I'd thought to wear rubber-soled shoes.

A minute later I reached the corner Estep had mentioned and crossed over to the west side of the street. The outline of a doorway showed in the dark several feet away. I backed into it and stood listening and watching the street for nearly a minute. Nothing happened. The street was as empty and silent as the eyes of a corpse. Thunder rumbled again, this time closer. Several large raindrops splattered on the sidewalk in front of me. I moved out of the doorway and walked along close to the buildings until I reached the alleyway halfway down the block. It was right where Estep had said it would be, narrow and dark, jammed in between two hulking, squat-looking warehouses. I stopped again, listening, and letting my eyes become accustomed to the blacker darkness of the alleyway. Still there was nothing.

I slipped the .38 out of the shoulder clip and entered the alley, walking on the balls of my feet and staying as close as possible to the wall of the warehouse on my left. The door was nearly fifty feet from the street. More thunder was rolling across the sky, and rain was beginning to fall in earnest by the time I found it. I stopped just short of the door and listened. No sound came from inside, and no light showed beneath the door. The .38 was in my right hand. Still keeping my body clear of the door, I reached out, knocked twice with my left hand, and jerked it back from the door. I never did anything smarter. The sudden vicious rattle of a Tommy gun ripped the silence, and the door splintered into agonizing life as the bullets cut a waist-high path across it, splatting

against the wall of the warehouse across the alley. Then silence and falling rain.

I stopped breathing, pressed back against the wall, and waited. One . . . two . . . three seconds passed. The door moved again, this time slowly out into the alley away from me. It hung there a second, and then the slim figure of a man stepped quickly out. He was bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves. The Tommy gun was cradled in his arms. He stepped out too fast and too far. He was looking down for something that should have been sprawled in the alley. That was a big mistake. It put him three feet farther out in the alley than I was. It also put his back toward me. I changed my grip on the gun from the butt to the barrel, took one step towards him, and swung at the back of his head. Joe DiMaggio never aimed better or swung harder. He never knew what hit him. The butt of the gun smashed against his skull with a sickening thud, and he dropped without a sound, pitching forward on his face and still hugging the Tommy gun.

Lightning flashed near by, followed by the deafening crash of thunder. The rain came down harder, tearing frantically at the walls of the warehouse and soaking the alley. I took the pencil flashlight from my pocket and knelt beside the man. Blood trickled down his neck from the wound on the back of his head. The hair under the light of the flash was dirty blond. I pulled his head around and looked at him. It was a face I'd never seen before, young, pale and thin lipped, beardless and soft, yet old before its time, the face of a doped-up gunman. I snapped off the flash and let his head fall back on the pavement. He wasn't dead, at least not yet, and it would take a week

in the hospital to bring him around if he got started soon. Somehow it didn't worry me much.

I got to my feet, holding the flashlight in one hand and the .38 in the other. Moving slowly and carefully, I crossed the alley and stopped by the open door. No sound came from inside. I stepped quickly through the door and moved to the left away from the opening. Still nothing but thunder and rain. The room felt empty and not too big. I waited, pressing close against the wall. My eyes were accustomed to the dark, but I couldn't see anything in the inky blackness. I decided to try the light and snapped it on, playing it quickly around the room. I only kept it on a couple of seconds, just long enough to show me a desk and chair in one corner and an open door directly opposite me. I'd guessed right about the room. It was small. There was a telephone on the desk. The open door apparently led into the warehouse proper. I snapped the light off, and a man's voice cautiously called from somewhere on the other side of the open door, "You got him, Johnny?" The voice was distant and muffled with a near echo, the way a voice sounds in a large, empty room. It was Estep. He was somewhere in the darkness of the warehouse beyond the open door.

I groped my way slowly across the office floor and found the door. I slipped quickly through it, stepped away from the opening, and dropped to my knees, keeping my body crouched low. Estep spoke again, this time closer. The echo quality was still there, but the voice wasn't muffled any more. "Did he bring it, Johnny?" I judged he was somewhere on the other side of the big room, thirty or forty feet away.

I kept my voice low but penetrating. "The gunman went to sleep, Luke. It's going to take a doctor to wake him up."

"Drake!" He said it so softly I could barely hear it.

"That reception wasn't in the bargain."

There was a pause, and I tried to locate his position as I slowly inched my body along the floor farther away from the door. Nothing but blackness met my eyes, deep, silent, smothering blackness. My eyes were as accustomed to the dark as they'd ever be, and I couldn't see a thing. But neither could Estep. Suddenly he spoke again from across the room. "Johnny's dead?"

"Not yet. I think I fractured his skull. The Tommy gun just wrecked the door." I moved farther along the floor.

Estep was moving slowly along the floor, too. His voice sounded farther to the right when he spoke again. "I didn't tell him to pump you. He must have thought you were crossing us up."

I laughed. "Sure."

"I swear it, Drake. We can still make a deal. Turn on your light."

I laughed again. "I've got a gun in my hand. Turn on yours."

"I don't have a light, and I haven't got a gun. I tell you I wanted to play it straight. The kid must have been nervous. To hell with him. We can still make our deal. I've got the money right here."

"The deal's off," I said. "There never was a deal."

"You didn't bring the Joy Powder?"

"Joy Powder?" I stopped moving along the floor.

Something stirred uneasily in the back of my brain.

"Yeah, yeah, the morphine that Tucker hid from me. You found it, didn't you?"

I said slowly, "I thought it was a negative and prints."

"A negative? A negative of what?" His voice was genuinely puzzled. He'd stopped crawling, too.

I righted my body a little and looked into the darkness. "A negative of a dirty picture, a dirty picture featuring a very prominent man."

The big room became silent. It stayed that way for nearly ten seconds. Then Estep said, "I don't get it, Peeper. What are you driving at?"

"Blackmail."

"I don't know anything about any blackmail."

"The Calhoun girl did."

"If Tucker was working a squeeze, she was doing it alone."

"She couldn't have worked this one alone. *She* was in the picture."

The voice across the room became almost startled. "The hell you say!" Silence took over again and then he said, "You found this negative in Tucker's apartment?"

"No. I didn't find anything in her apartment, but her body . . . and you."

He spoke in a lower voice as if to himself. "I thought you found the dope. The bitch was crossing me up. She said it was lost, but I know she hid it. She figured she could get rid of it and keep all the money."

I moved along the floor again, then got half to my knees. Both the flashlight and the gun were still in my hands. "Is that why you killed Tucker, Luke?"

"You're as wrong as the coppers. I didn't kill Tucker or the maid either."

"It's no good, Luke. You were up in Harlem this evening looking for the maid. The delicatessen man cinched it."

"Sure, I was up there. When I couldn't find the Joy Powder this morning and then read about the maid finding the body, I figured maybe she'd found it and taken it. I went up there looking for her."

"And when you found her she said she didn't know what you were talking about so you killed her. Or maybe you killed her because she had the watch and was black-mailing you because she knew you'd killed Tucker."

Something stirred in the darkness across the room. Estep was moving again trying to place my position. "I didn't shoot her," he said. "I went looking for her and I found her. She was alive then. It was about six-thirty." She convinced me she didn't have the dope and she didn't mention the watch or say she thought I'd killed Tucker. She figured the same as everybody else at that point, that Tucker had slipped in the tub and killed herself. At least that's what she told me."

"She was lying. She took the watch off Tucker's arm."

Estep's voice grew harder and he said suddenly, "If you didn't have the dope or those pictures, why did you come here tonight?"

I put the flashlight in my coat pocket and started untying one of my shoes. I slipped it off the foot and held it in my left hand. My right hand still held the .38. "I wanted to find you, Luke."

“Why?”

“So I could hand you over to the police for a double murder.”

Another five or ten seconds of silence passed. Then Estep said, “I’ve already told you I didn’t kill either one of them. If you think you’re man enough to take me, that’s up to you. I’ve got a gun in my hand, too. I know where the door is over there, and I’m going out of it. If you move or shoot, I’ll spot you and they’ll pick you up full of lead.”

I didn’t answer him. Instead I crouched there in the dark, holding my breath. Even so I couldn’t hear a sound. He was moving silently. That meant he was moving very slowly . . . if he was moving. I decided he was, waited about five or six seconds, and tossed the shoe in what I figured was the general direction of the entrance to the office. It smacked against the open door fifteen feet away. Rusty hinges creaked, and a gun roared from the end of the room. He fired four times fast, each shot darting out little flashes of light towards the door. Just before the fourth shot I started firing at the flash of his gun from a steady kneeling position. I fired five times and waited. It took nearly fifteen or twenty seconds for the deafening roar of the shots to echo out in the empty barnlike warehouse. Then silence again, silence and darkness. A minute passed, then two and three. My legs were becoming cramped, and sweat was pouring off my face. Still I waited motionless, listening and wondering. There was nothing. Two more minutes went by and I had to move. I decided to take a chance, pulled the

flashlight out and turned it on, pointing it in the direction I'd fired.

Estep lay flat on his back with both arms flung out spread-eagle fashion. He lay very, very still. His gun was still clutched in his right hand. Keeping the light on him, I walked slowly over and looked down into his face. He was dead. All five of my bullets had hit him, but the one in his temple had done the trick. My knees were weak and rubbery, and I felt sick at my stomach. Both my hands were trembling, and the gun felt as heavy as a cannon. I put it in the shoulder clip and went out through the little office to the alleyway. The rain had slowed some but it hadn't stopped. The thunder was now only an occasional distant rumble.

The blond man with the Tommy gun hadn't moved. He still lay on his face with the gun clutched in his arms. I bent over and shined the light on him. The wound had stopped bleeding, and he was breathing noisily. I decided not to move him and went back into the little office again. My flashlight picked up the phone on the ancient desk. I went over, took down the receiver, and held it to my ear. The tone signal buzzed reassuringly. It wasn't disconnected. I reached in my pocket, found the envelope Herby had given me, and dialled the number of Tim Costello's Bar. A minute later Herby came on the wire. "Drake?" His voice was low and excited. He didn't sound drunk.

"Yeah," I said.

"What happened?"

As briefly as possible I told him. When I had finished, he said, "God, what a man! What a story!"

"It's not over yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Estep didn't kill the maid and the Calhoun girl after all. I think he told me the truth tonight."

Herby's voice was tense with excitement. "Who did?"

"I'm not sure yet, but a couple of things are beginning to add up. There are five other people with swell motives. Four of them have perfect alibis for Tucker's killing but none for the maid's. The fifth one has no alibi for Tucker's death, but has a perfect one for the maid."

"But it's a cinch the same person killed them both."

"I know."

"It doesn't make sense. You must be wrong about Estep. He must have been the killer."

"You're wrong, Herby."

"What makes you so sure Estep didn't do it?"

"When I came here tonight, I was certain he was the murderer. Even after I had to kill him, I thought so; but just a second ago while I was waiting for you to come to the phone, I remembered something he said tonight, something he said naturally and unplanned, something he'd never have said if he'd murdered the maid."

"What?"

"He said, 'I didn't *shoot* the maid!' Lydia Smith wasn't *shot*. She was stabbed to death."

There was a pause and then Herby said, "Of course, it might have been a gag. He might have said it on purpose."

"I don't think so. Estep bought protection for his dope racket. Before the story of the two killings ever hit the street tonight, he was tipped that he was hot, that the

police had tied him in and were looking for him for a double murder. I doubt if his tip included the ice-pick angle. He just naturally supposed the maid had been shot."

"But those alibis? What about them?"

"Something's got to give. I'm going to play a hunch. It may not amount to much, but it may be the tip-off. I think one of the alibis can be broken."

"How?"

"I don't know that yet. First I want to play this hunch. After you get your story in about Estep go over to my apartment. Jo Hockaday is there waiting to hear from me. Stay with her until you hear from me."

"Okay, but what about you? You'll have to make a statement about Estep's death."

"I'll do it later. Keep my name out of it. The gunman will probably talk when they bring him around."

"Suppose he dies?"

"The story is here for the police to see. Both of them still have their guns in their hands and both guns have been fired. Let me worry about that."

"Okay," said Herby and hung up.

I broke the phone connection with my finger, waited several seconds and then dialled the operator. When she came on, I told her to send an ambulance and the police to the alleyway between the warehouses. Before she could ask any questions, I put the receiver back on its hook. The rain had stopped when I came out of the alleyway into the street. At the corner of Hudson Street and Christopher I looked at my watch under a street lamp. The hands pointed to one-fifteen. Just exactly an hour

had passed since my phone call from Estep. It felt more like a year. As I entered Sheridan Square, the ambulance came down Seventh and turned west, heading for the river. A late cab came along going uptown. I flagged it, got in, and told the driver to take me to Gramercy Park. I sank back in the seat, lit a cigarette, and closed my eyes. It didn't help. I could still see a dead, nude girl in a bathtub and the lifeless figure of Luke Estep sprawled on the floor of the warehouse.

chapter twenty-three

I LEFT the cab at Twentieth Street and Fourth Avenue and walked the rest of the way into the Square. The streets surrounding the park were dark and empty. A couple of buildings still had a few lighted windows, but there weren't any in number Two Twenty-two. Gramercy Park goes to bed early. I hoped it slept soundly, and walked quietly up the steps and into the small foyer of the building where Tucker Calhoun had lived. The door to the inside hall was closed and locked. It was too late at night to try the buzzer trick again. With the aid of the pencil flashlight, I carefully examined the lock. It was almost identically like the one on my apartment house. Just for luck I tried my own key. It wouldn't turn. I got out my ring of passkeys and went to work. Two minutes later the lock turned, and I stepped into the dark hallway.

The door closed behind me, and I went quickly and quietly up the stairs to the second floor. A single night light burned weakly at one end of the hall. I stopped a second, listening. Nothing but silence. I moved on down to Tucker's door and tried it. It, too, was locked. Once

more I got out the ring of passkeys. It was easier than the door downstairs. The first key worked. I stepped into the dark living room and closed the door behind me. Again I stopped and listened. Still nothing but silence. Across the room I could see dim light from the nearest street lamp shining through the tilted slats of the Venetian blinds. Moving slowly and carefully, I crossed to the windows and pulled the blinds shut. Next I drew the drapes across the window covering the Venetian blinds. Then I found a floor lamp and turned it on.

The room looked exactly as it had that morning. I went in the bedroom, drew the blinds, and turned on a light. It, too, looked just the same; the clothes were still in the same position and the bed hadn't been made. Nothing had changed in the kitchen either. The bathroom was different. There wasn't a body in the bathtub, and the blood had been cleaned up. I went back to the living room, took off my coat and hat, and started methodically searching the apartment.

Forty minutes later I'd gone through every room carefully and thoroughly. I had even sifted through the garbage in the kitchen and tested every cosmetic and food jar with a knife. I found a lot of things you'd expect to find in a woman's apartment and a few that surprised me, but I didn't find any negative and prints or dope. My watch said five minutes after two. I lit a cigarette and sat down on the big low-slung couch to think about it. So far my hunch was working out okay.

Behind me the Venetian blind clanked suddenly, and the curtains rustled apart as a gust of wind blew in from the open window. Over my head something tinkled

softly. I looked up and saw that the wind had swung the big chandelier gently. The glass tassels had bumped together with the movement, causing the tinkling sound. It was a beautiful, expensive chandelier but much too big for the small apartment. I ran my eyes idly over it and wondered where it had come from. Suddenly I got up from the couch and looked closer. At first glance the chandelier appeared to be made entirely of crystal hangings, but near the top there was a round bowl-shaped piece of brass through which the chain that held it up passed on its way to the ceiling. The inside of the bowl might make a swell hiding place.

In the kitchen I'd noticed a small stepladder folded up beside the icebox. I put out my cigarette and brought the ladder into the living room. Then I climbed up and felt inside the brass bowl. It was Tucker's hiding place, all right. My fingers touched a small tightly wrapped package. I took it out of the bowl, climbed down the ladder and unwrapped it. There weren't any negatives or prints inside, but there *was* about ten thousand dollars' worth of morphine. I put it down on a table and stood there looking at it. *Estep hadn't been lying*, and he'd said he didn't know anything about any negative or prints . . .

I put my coat and hat on and looked quickly around the living room for the telephone. It wasn't there. I went to the bedroom and looked inside. The phone stood on a small bed table at the head of the bed. I sat down on the edge of the unmade bed and dialled my own number. Jo answered almost immediately. "Steve?"

"Yes."

"Where are you? What's happened?"

"Never mind that now," I said. "Is Herby there?"

"Yes. He just this minute got here. I've been worried sick. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. Herby'll tell you the whole story. Put him on the wire."

In a minute Herby said, "Where are you?"

"I'm in Tucker Calhoun's apartment, and I think I know now who the murderer is."

"One of the five you mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Who?" His voice was tense with excitement.

"I've got to crack the alibi first. So far I . . ." I stopped suddenly and looked at the phone in my hand. Then I looked at the unmade bed. So simple, so damned simple. I laughed.

Over the wire Herby said, "What's wrong, Drake?"

"Nothing, nothing at all's wrong."

"I don't get it."

"Listen," I said, "if you want the scoop of your life, get a policeman, take Jo with you, and go to this address in about half an hour." I gave him the number of John Remington's house on West Tenth Street.

"What will we find there?" Herby asked.

"The murderer I hope."

"But the alibi? What about that?"

"I think I've just cracked it. At least I think I've got the key to it."

"What?"

"The Manhattan telephone book."

Herby started to say something else, but I hung up.

chapter twenty-four

IT was two-thirty-five in the morning when I paid off the taxi in front of John Remington's house on Tenth Street. Light showed in the windows of the living room. I went softly up the steps to the front door and stopped. By leaning out slightly to my right, I could see into the room where the light was. Remington and Margaret Tulane sat at a card table. They were sitting opposite each other and were apparently playing gin rummy. They played listlessly, and they weren't talking. Both were dressed in evening clothes. I watched them for several seconds and then pressed the doorbell. Remington laid down his hand and looked at his wife. She pushed her chair back, put down her hand, and walked out of the room. I straightened up and waited.

The door opened and Margaret Tulane's throaty voice said, "Yes?" She stood gracefully in the doorway with her head slightly thrown back and one famous hand resting easily on the door frame in a pose as familiar as her face. The hand was still slender and graceful, but it wasn't young any more. The figure and face might have fooled me but not the hand. A figure can be moulded with

diet and care, and a face can be lifted; but a woman's hands always show her age. The veins were blue, and they stood out on the wrinkling skin. It was an old woman's hand. It shocked and startled me. She ran her sad eyes over me. If she recognized me, she didn't show it.

"My name is Drake," I said. "I want to talk to your husband."

She stood there for several seconds, watching me in silence. Then she nodded her head slowly and stood aside so that I could enter. It was almost as if she'd been expecting me, known I was coming. I walked past her just as Remington appeared in the doorway to the living room. When he saw me, the colour drained from his face and he stopped. Margaret Tulane waved her hand towards me and said,

"This gentleman says he wants to speak with you, John."

Remington nodded and looked anxiously at his wife. Her eyes were on me, and she didn't see his glance. "Do you mind, Peg?" he asked.

"Of course not." She walked past us to the stairway and started up towards the second floor. She spoke again over her shoulder without looking back. "Good night, John." It may have been my imagination, but I thought there was a certain finality in her tone.

Remington waited until she disappeared around the landing. Then he turned his worried eyes on me and said in a low voice, "You shouldn't have come here at this hour, like this, Drake."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I have to talk to you. It's important."

He took hold of my arm. "On the way downtown a little while ago I bought a late edition of *The Mirror*. It's carrying a front page story about the murder of a coloured woman. They say she was Tucker Calhoun's maid, that she found Tucker's body in the bathtub this afternoon. The story also says that the police know now that Tucker was murdered."

"That's right," I said, and motioned towards the living room. "Maybe we'd better talk in there."

Remington nodded his head and walked back into the living room. I followed him. He turned again facing me and said, still keeping his voice in a near whisper, "Did you find the man you met in the apartment?"

"I found him, but that isn't why I came."

"He killed them both. The paper says a man answering that description was seen in Harlem just before the maid's murder."

"The paper is right. He *was* in Harlem and he *was* looking for the maid, but he didn't kill either Tucker or the maid."

An expression of surprise crossed Remington's face. "I don't understand. This morning you said . . ."

"That was this morning. A lot of things have happened since then. Estep's death is one of them."

"Estep's dead?"

"Yes. I killed him myself tonight in self-defence. I told him I'd found the thing he was looking for in Tucker's apartment. I told him I'd make a deal so I could meet him. But he tried to cross me up by hiring a gunman to kill me."

"You mean you found the negative and prints?" Remington's voice was vibrant with anticipation.

I shook my head. "There aren't any negative and prints, and there never were."

The room became silent. Remington stood motionless, watching me with his deep-set eyes. When he spoke again, his voice trembled just a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the whole story about the party in Detroit, the man snapping the picture of you and Tucker in bed, the blackmail, all of it was a lie, something you made up. I mean *you* murdered Tucker Calhoun and her maid, Lydia Smith."

Remington's face was the colour of cigar ash. He gripped the back of a near-by chair for support. "I killed her? But . . . but you know that's impossible. You know I couldn't have killed Tucker Calhoun. You said so yourself. You were here. You talked to her this morning just before you went to her apartment. You know I couldn't have gotten there ahead of you."

I grinned. Maybe it wasn't a very nice grin, but it made me feel better. "You're smart, Remington, brilliant, otherwise you wouldn't be where you are in your profession. Only a top-flight playwright and a swell actor could have planned and carried out your idea for an alibi. It was terrific, pure genius in fact, and it was so simple that it is almost unbelievable."

Remington's eyes were still on my face. They seemed fascinated, almost trancelike. "But you know I couldn't have done it. You talked to her . . ."

I shook my head. "Uh uh, I didn't talk to Tucker on

the phone this morning. I talked to a woman *named* Calhoun all right, but her first name wasn't Tucker. Tucker was already lying dead in her bathtub when I got here with your chauffeur. She was lying in the tub where you put her after hitting her on the back of the head and undressing her, no more than half an hour before I got here to see you. Unless I miss my guess, you'd barely gotten back in the house when Jova arrived with me."

Remington shook his head helplessly. "No, no, Drake, you're insane, you don't know what you're saying."

"I'm not sure how you set up the plant. Maybe she really was going to take a bath and that may have given you the accident idea. But the idea of killing her wasn't new. You'd had that quite a while and you'd planned it carefully. I'm still not sure of your motive either, but I've got a hunch you knew Tucker Calhoun pretty well. She liked men and money. Lillian Gault told me Tucker had several rich men keeping her. I think you were one of them; maybe you were the only one. But you're not young any more. Maybe you found out she was playing around with Gault and Estep. You might have warned her to stop. If you did, she probably laughed at you and told you to go to hell. She didn't need your money any longer. She was making plenty by peddling dope with Estep." I stopped talking and watched Remington's face. It had lost all its suaveness and dignity. It was the face of a doomed man, a terrified, fear-ridden man who sees the end in sight. His hand slid slowly from the chair and rested on a small table next to it. His other hand joined it and he leaned forward, still keeping his

eyes on my face. His voice was a low whispering hiss.
"You'll never prove it."

I laughed. "The hell I won't. It was a swell idea, and it might have worked if you hadn't had a couple of bad breaks."

"Bad breaks?" His voice was suddenly unbelieving, childlike.

"The first one was picking *me* as the alibi. You couldn't possibly have known that Mrs. Gault had hired me last night to trail her husband who was playing around with Tucker Calhoun, the woman you were planning to kill. That was really ironic, a tough break, the thing that could only happen once in twenty thousand times."

Remington's eyes were incredulous. He said softly, "No, no."

I went on. "At that, it could have turned into a good break because Mrs. Gault tried to kill Tucker herself last night. That made *her* the number-one suspect. But you see I found out about Estep last night, too. I didn't tell you that. I didn't even mention his name when I told you I met him in Tucker's apartment this morning. I simply said I had met a man. Yet a minute ago you knew who Estep was when I told you I killed him to-night. I think you knew all about Estep. Tucker threw you over for him, and so you decided to kill her. You were crazy about her; but when you couldn't have her any more, you decided nobody else could either.

"The next bad break you got was the fact that Tucker's telephone was beside her bed and not out in the living room. This morning when I called the number you pretended was Tucker's, the phone rang four or five

times before it was answered. The woman who answered the phone had been waked from a sound sleep. If the phone had been by her bed the way it is in Tucker's apartment, she would have answered before it rang five times. That meant that the apartment I called had the phone in a room other than the bedroom. When I realized that, I tumbled to the alibi. It was smart all right.

"Just before I came here tonight, I took a look at the Manhattan phone book. There are fifteen Calhouns listed. Four of them are single women. Tucker was one of them, and she had a Gramercy exchange. One of the other women named Calhoun had a Gramercy exchange also. Tucker's was Gramercy-5; and the other woman's, whose name is Agnes Calhoun, was Gramercy-3. It was this Agnes Calhoun's number that you gave me this morning.

"You probably had decided on the plan a couple of weeks ago when you discovered the similar exchanges. Unless I miss my guess you checked up on Agnes and found out all about her habits; you discovered that she slept late; you probably called her several times, always saying you'd gotten a wrong number, until you were fairly certain she'd be at home at eleven or eleven-thirty in the morning.

"Then you went into your act. First you made up the blackmail story. This morning you sent your chauffeur to my office to hire me. As soon as he left, you went to Tucker's apartment. You must have had a key. If you'd been keeping her, it's a cinch you did. You let yourself into her apartment, found her getting ready to take a bath, and slugged her with something that would

produce the same type wound as a fall in the tub. I don't know yet what the weapon was, but the police will undoubtedly find it when I hand you in."

Remington's face twisted grotesquely. "You'll never take me." One of his hands began edging along the table. I put it down to nervousness and went on talking.

"After you killed her, you put her in the tub and left the apartment. That was when you got the third bad break. You didn't notice that she was wearing a wrist watch. You must have gotten home just before I arrived at your house with the chauffeur. I played right into your hands. That was when the fact that you're a terrific actor helped you. You really put on a swell act. It was a hell of a gamble, and you played the long shot. You even got me to suggest the phone call, and you convinced me that I'd have to go straight to the apartment from your house. That was your alibi, and it was a swell one. You must have had a bad moment when the other Calhoun woman didn't answer her phone right away. Maybe she usually got up half an hour earlier, and you figured she'd answer the way she did when you called on the dry runs. She had probably slept later this morning than usual. I'd heard Tucker's voice only once, just a few words the night before. You, of course, didn't know that, but it didn't matter. I never would have recognized it on the phone, especially when it was drowsy with sleep and annoyance at being waked up.

"I never doubted for a minute that the woman I talked to hadn't been Tucker until I realized that Estep wasn't the murderer. All the other suspects had perfect alibis, but one of them had to be a phony. When I saw

the phone by Tucker's bed tonight, I tumbled to it. The phone book cinched it. Miss Agnes Calhoun will probably get a kick out of telling the D.A.'s office about her frantic trip to Bellevue this morning. I'll bet she's still dizzy trying to figure it out.

"Then you got your last bad break. Before I got back to the apartment to take the watch the maid came in, saw it, took it off and guessed that you were the murderer. She probably was one of the very few people who knew you were keeping Tucker. Maids have a way of knowing family secrets. She must have called you this afternoon, told you she had the watch, and tried to blackmail you. You agreed to pay off and went to her place in Harlem early this evening. Jova told me on the phone tonight that you'd broken a date with your wife this afternoon. You *had* to break it because you were in Harlem killing the maid, Lydia Smith." I paused. "How am I doing, Remington?"

He didn't answer. Too late I saw his hand had dropped off the table. I heard the drawer open and saw the gun leap into his hand. I saw it come up barrel first, pointing at me before my own hand even touched the handle of my .38.

The roar of a gun filled the room, and I was still standing up. At first I thought he'd missed me. Then I saw Remington stagger backwards clawing the air with his hands. His gun dropped to the floor, and a small spot of red appeared on his white dress shirt. I had the .38 in my hand by the time he staggered back against the fireplace. He slumped there working his lips. No sound came out. For a long second he looked at me sadly. The spot

of red on his shirt spread wider and wider. One of his long slim hands crept half-heartedly up towards it. It never got there. His head flopped down on his chest, and he pitched forward on his face with a shuddering crash.

I turned quickly and looked back towards the entrance to the hall. Margaret Tulane stood like a statue in the doorway. The gun in her hand was still pointed across the room. The smell of gunpowder was strong. She lowered her arm slowly until the gun hung straight down in her hand. Her beautiful voice was low and calm. "See if he's dead."

I knelt down and turned Remington over. His eyes were open, but they weren't seeing anything. His lips were drawn back over his teeth in an absurd grimace. I rolled him back on his stomach and stood up. "He's dead," I said.

She nodded her head slowly and walked into the room. "You'd better call the police. The telephone is out there." She motioned towards the hall. I didn't move. She put the gun carefully on a table and sat down.

"You heard everything?" I asked.

"Yes, but I've known about Tucker Calhoun for over two years. This morning I happened to overhear him tell Jova to go to your office and hire you. I pretended to go uptown, but instead stayed here and listened outside the door of his study."

"I saw you when I came out."

"You didn't tell him though?"

"Not then."

She glanced at the dead man on the floor. Her eyes were coldly impersonal. "I knew he kept a gun in that

drawer. When you came back tonight, I thought it still had something to do with the blackmail story. I didn't even know that Tucker Calhoun was dead. I haven't seen a newspaper today; and, of course, he didn't tell me. I also knew he was lying to you when he told you about the party in Detroit. I thought he was doing it to make himself out a perfect husband. But I really believed she was blackmailing him. Tonight when I heard what you said to him and realized he was a murderer, I guessed that he might try to kill you with the gun he had in the drawer." She indicated the gun on the table. "That is my own gun. I've kept it in my room ever since I was threatened by kidnappers several years ago. I went upstairs and got it. When I saw him reach in the drawer, I shot him."

"You saved my life," I said. "There won't be any trouble about your killing him."

Margaret Tulane shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose not. It doesn't really matter to me anyway. I'm very, very tired." She got slowly to her feet and stood looking down at Remington's body. She spoke absently. "I suppose the blood will ruin the rug. It's a pity because I'm very fond of it."

"You didn't love him?"

She laughed a bitter little laugh. "Once I did, but that was years ago. I stopped loving him two months after we were married when I found out what he really was, a lying cheat who lived on his ego."

"Why did you stay married to him and let him think he was fooling you?"

She shrugged again. "We were very successful in the

theatre. I suppose you might call it 'good business.'” She turned away from the dead man on the floor. “Now you had better call the police.” I moved slowly towards the hall and the front doorbell rang.

I spoke over my shoulder. “I won’t need to call them.” She didn’t answer. I went to the door and opened it. It was Jo and Herby. They had two policemen with them.

chapter twenty-five

JO and I were sitting in the little all-night diner on the west side of Sixth Avenue just above Eighth Street. It was nearly six A.M. and already broad daylight. Both of us were very tired. For the past three hours we'd been at police headquarters with Herby, Margaret Tulane, and both of the Gaults. I'd told my story three or four times, and the others had backed me up. The wounded gunman was in the hospital and wasn't going to die, at least not from the crack on the head that I had given him. His name was Johnny Malte, and he had a record a mile long. He was wanted on a couple of counts, and the D.A.'s office figured he'd talk plenty to lighten the load. Gabeau himself had questioned me privately. He seemed to believe my story about both Estep's and Remington's deaths. Of course, the matter wasn't completely over yet. There were still some formalities to go through, but Gabeau assured both Margaret Tulane and me that we had nothing to worry about.

The District Attorney's office had already talked to Agnes Calhoun. She had verified my story of the phone

call. Neither of the murder weapons had as yet been found. They probably never would be.

The counterman came over and stopped in front of us. "What'll it be?" he asked.

I looked at Jo. Her summer print dress was rumpled, and her hair could have stood a comb. Her eyes were tired and sleepy-looking, and she needed lipstick as much as she ever would. She was still the nicest girl I'd ever met. She gazed down at the typed menu without seeing it. "I'll have three fried eggs, toast, and coffee with cream," she said.

"I'll have the same," I told the counterman. He went away.

Jo looked sideways at me. "Do you realize we never did eat dinner?"

I nodded. "My stomach's been complaining about it all night long. It nearly worried me to death. I didn't have anything else to think about."

Jo laughed. Then she sighed and her face became serious. "It's all been very exciting, though. I never thought I'd be mixed up in a real murder."

"Two murders and two self-defence killings."

"Yes." She looked pensively at the menu. "Well, I guess it's back to the Gas and Electric Company for me now." Her eyes turned towards me. "Did you really think when you came to Danbury today that I might have been the one who killed Tucker Calhoun?"

"You know," I said, "you've got a sweet face. You'd make a swell wife for some man."

She nodded seriously. "I can cook, too, and I just love children."

"I hate 'em," I said. "You have to get a steady job when you have children."

Jo laughed again, and the counterman came with our food. When he went away again, she said, "You've got a steady job, haven't you?"

"Very unsteady. I probably won't get another job for a month."

"Do you make much money?"

"Yesterday I did."

Her voice became disappointed. "You didn't get the ten thousand dollars, did you?"

"No, but I got twelve hundred, that is if Remington's cheque doesn't bounce."

"You don't really think it will?"

"Of course not. He was a lot of things, but he wasn't poor."

We ate in silence for a couple of minutes, and then Jo said, "Twelve hundred dollars is a lot of money. You could even get married on it."

I pointed my fork at Jo. "Listen," I said, "I'm a very tough guy. Children and vine-covered cottages don't appeal to me at all. I don't like mowing lawns, and I hate work. Sometimes I get drunk. I like to swear, and I smoke in bed."

"I smoke in bed, too, after Mother's gone to sleep."

"Besides people would talk. They'd say you only married me for my money. Wait till I spend it, and then we'll talk it over."

"How are you going to spend that twelve hundred dollars?"

"I read an article the other day about the Virgin Is-

lands. It sounds like a swell place. I think I'll go to bed and sleep for a couple of days, then catch a steamer for St. Thomas where I can relax until I run out of money." I wasn't serious, of course, but it turned out I wasn't kidding, except about the steamer and the relaxing. I went by plane and I didn't relax. But what the hell, that's another story. Maybe some day when I get the time, I'll write it up.

AUGUST, 1995	1662	1010	1578	1625	1158	1484
SEPTEMBER, 1995	1679	1010	1578	1625	1163	1493
OCTOBER, 1995	1692	1010	1578	1625	1168	1501
NOVEMBER, 1995	1635	1010	1578	1682	1170	1479
DECEMBER, 1995	1595	1010	1578	1835	1166	1473
December, 1994	1513	1007	1465	1625	1117	1388

